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THE QUEST FOR CATHAY

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THE DEPARTURE OF THE POLOS FROM VENICE

From *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Early 13th century MS. Bodleian Library



# THE QUEST FOR CATHAY

By

Brigadier-General

SIR PERCY SYKES

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*A History of Exploration, etc.*

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But should one wish to examine the question of the Antipodes, he would easily find it to be old wives' fables. For if two men on opposite sides placed the soles of their feet each against each, whether they chose to stand on earth, or water, or air, or fire, or any other kind of body, how could both be found standing upright? The one would assuredly be found in the natural upright position, and the other, contrary to nature, head downward. Such notions are opposed to reason and alien to our nature and condition.

COSMAS INDICOPLEUSTES, Bk. I, p. 17

*Benedick*.—I will go on the slightest errand now to the Antipodes that you can devise to send me on; I will fetch you a tooth-picker now from the farthest inch of Asia; bring you the length of Prester John's foot; fetch you a hair off the great Cham's beard.

SHAKESPEARE, *Much Ado about Nothing*, Act II, Sc. 1.

La géographie dans tous les temps et chez tous les peuples a suivi la marche même de la civilisation et y mesure en quelque sorte ses progrès.

VIVIEN DE SAINT-MARTIN



## PREFACE

THIS work deals with perhaps the greatest event of the Middle Ages, the discovery of Cathay, as China was then called, that vast empire of the Far East with its ancient civilisation, its immense wealth, and its cities whose populations could be reckoned by millions. At first the fellow-citizens of the Polos could not credit the reports they made, although there was no doubt as to the value of the jewels they brought back to Venice. But gradually corroboration made Europe and her geographers realise something of the magnitude and the importance of their discoveries.

Thanks to the Polos, Europe received relatively accurate information on every part of Asia which they visited, with many useful hearsay reports of neighbouring countries. Perhaps the fact that Columbus covered his copy of Marco Polo's immortal book with numerous annotations and depended entirely on it for facts, as opposed to empirical theories, constitutes the highest tribute that the discoverer of the New World could have paid to the discoverer of Cathay. This book I have been privileged to hold in my hand.

For about a century after the journeys of Carpini, Rubruquis and the Polos, the land-gates and the water-gates of Cathay remained open. Then darkness descended, partly owing to the isolation established by the Ming dynasty, and for Europe the wonders of Cathay became little more than a setting for romantic stories.

Again the scene shifts. Vasco da Gama discovered the ocean route to India in 1498; in the second decade of the sixteenth century, Portuguese mariners entered China, as it was now termed, by its water-gates; and, finally, thanks to the heroic Jesuit missionary Benedict Goes, the Quest for Cathay was accomplished.

In this book I have not gone into the various journeys and



## *Preface*

voyages of the explorers in detail. Rather, I have tried to bring out what was of importance and interest; and I have realised that routes sometimes vary according to the seasons, and that meticulous accuracy, even if it were desirable, is unobtainable.

My thanks are especially due to the President and Council of the Hakluyt Society and to the editors of the Society's many volumes which I have consulted and quoted. Mr Basil Gray and Dr. E. G. Millar have given me valuable advice in the selection of illustrations, as has Mr Edward Lynam in the choice of early maps. I am also indebted to my daughters for much careful typing.

In this year which has seen the marvellous exhibition of Chinese Art in London, it may perhaps be considered appropriate that the story of the Quest for Cathay should be told by one who has followed in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, of Hsuan-tsang, of Marco Polo and other great travellers, in Central Asia and neighbouring countries. These journeys have constituted the golden years of my life.

P. M. SYKES

THE ATHENAEUM,  
*September 1936*

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## INTRODUCTION









ASIA. From Ptolemy's Geographia



## INTRODUCTION

IN this work explorers and travellers of different periods appear on the scene. Consequently it seems desirable to give an outline of their views on geography, and thereby to provide a background and a setting for my theme.

The cosmogony of the Jews was mainly based on the theories of the origin of the earth prevailing in Babylonia. The oldest belief was that prevailing at the primitive port of Eridu, situated on a freshwater lagoon on the shore of the Persian Gulf. It was noted that the land was constantly gaining through the deposit of silt in the delta formed by the Euphrates,<sup>1</sup> and thus it came to be believed that the earth was formed by the water of the 'Great Deep'. This body was naturally identified with the Persian Gulf, termed the 'Salt' or 'Bitter River', and was believed to encircle the world.

Ea, the culture-god of Eridu, was the divine creator:

Ea tied reeds together to form a weir in the water,  
He made dust and mixed it with the reeds of the weir,  
That the gods might dwell in the seat of their well-being.

The Deep became the home of Ea, and this throne, 'the sacred mound', was situated on an island formed by deltaic action. In the extreme north was 'the Mountain of the World, on which

<sup>1</sup> The Euphrates, Tigris and Karun discharged their waters independently into the Persian Gulf until a considerable period after the voyage of Nearchus in the fourth century B.C. There was also the *Wadi-al-Batin*, now dry, but formerly a great river which flowed into the Persian Gulf opposite modern Muhammerah and brought down much silt.



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the sky rested'. It was also the 'sun-illuminated house', from which the sun emerged in the morning and, after moving along the paths of heaven, re-entered at sunset. The abode of the dead was situated under the earth, entered by a gateway in the west. But there was also the destructive aspect of the Deep, which had once nearly destroyed mankind with a deluge. Embodied under this destructive aspect was Tiamat, pictured as a dragon, the enemy of the gods of light and of law.

In the Hebrew cosmogony, as described in the book of Genesis, the world is assumed to be already in existence and was prepared for the use of man. A river flowed through Eden, a garden situated in some remote high-lying plateau to the east. Its river, parted into four branches, became the source of four great rivers: to wit, Pison, the river of Arabia; Gihon, the river of Ethiopia; Hiddekel (Tigris) and Euphrates, the river which fed the earliest settlements of man in Babylonia. This cosmogony is based, to a considerable extent, on that of Babylonia, as is proved by the name Eden and by the geographical description of the four rivers, but the colouring is that of a dweller in Palestine, where fertility comes directly from rain and not from irrigation. The flood, too, was caused by rain in the Jewish account. We have a definite reference to the Babylonian myth of Tiamat in the verses of Psalm lxxiv.: 'Thou didst divide the sea through thy power: thou breakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou smotest the heads of Leviathan in pieces: and gavest him to be meat for the people in the wilderness.' In the book of Job<sup>1</sup> we read 'He stretcheth out the north over the empty place, and hangeth the earth upon nothing', this verse embodying the Babylonian theory of the earth being a disc

<sup>1</sup> xxvi, 7.

## *Introduction*

floating in space. Moreover, the magnificent chapter xxxviii. is definitely based on Babylonian cosmology.

The earliest maritime empire to be established in the Mediterranean, around which the ancient civilisation of Europe centred, was founded about 2800 B.C. by the Minoan dynasty of Crete, whose capital of Cnossos remains a permanent source of wonder to visitors. After the overthrow of the Minoan empire by the Achaeans in the middle of the fifteenth century B.C. their successors as navigators were the Phoenicians, whose far-flung commercial activities extended to Spain and the 'Pillars of Hercules'. They even sailed the Atlantic Ocean. Gaulos (Gozo), named from its resemblance to a round trading vessel, and Gadeira (the Gades of Horace and the modern Cadiz), both recall their Phoenician origin. There is every reason to believe that the Greeks were much influenced by the Phoenicians in their geographical knowledge.

To turn to early Greek conceptions of the world, in the poems of Homer (composed before 900 B.C.) it is described as a flat disc circular in outline similar to that described by Job. To this theory was added the idea of the broad river Oceanus, the Babylonian 'Deep', which was believed to flow continually onwards and to return upon itself. The sky was conceived as being a concave vault resting on the edge of the earth like a lid, while Tartarus stretched below the earth, symmetrical with the heavens. Anaximander of Miletus, born in 610 B.C., introduced from Babylon the sundial, and constructed the first map of the world on these Homeric lines. Herodotus, however, who flourished in the fifth century B.C., was severe on this theory: 'For my part I cannot but laugh when I see numbers of persons drawing maps of the world without having any reason



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to guide them; making, as they do, the ocean-stream to run all round the earth, and the earth itself to be an exact circle, as if described by a pair of compasses, with Europe and Asia just the same size'.<sup>1</sup>

As the result of his extensive travels in Europe, Asia and Egypt, supplemented by constant enquiries, Herodotus held that the world was longer from east to west than it was broad from north to south. The terms of longitude and latitude are based on his views. He also applied the Greek theory of symmetry to complete, in the unknown world, the geographical features of the known. For example, the unknown upper waters of the Nile were shown to flow from west to east to balance the known course of the Danube.

A century later, Aristotle, the first scientific geographer, demonstrated the sphericity of the globe by the tendency of matter to fall together towards a common centre, by the circular shadow thrown by the earth on the moon during an eclipse, and by the shifting of the horizon as a traveller journeyed from north to south, losing familiar stars and sighting new ones. Aristotle represented the culmination and the close of the older period of the geographical knowledge of the Greeks. The campaigns of Alexander the Great opened up vast areas of Asia to the Greeks, and the works of Arrian, Strabo and other writers are based on the writings of the contemporary historians, and include priceless geographical sections. It must be recollected that routes followed by Alexander were measured by *bematistai* or 'steppers', the earliest surveyors.

To continue our survey, Strabo, who was born in Pontus

<sup>1</sup> Bk. iv, ch. 36. I have used Rawlinson's translation, revised by A. W. Lawrence, throughout this work.

## Introduction

about 63 B.C., wrote a work dealing with geography from the mathematical, physical, historical and political aspect. He accepts much that is untrue and, while accepting the ideas of Homer, regards Herodotus as untrustworthy. Yet, taken as a whole and making due allowances for his prejudices, Strabo's work is most valuable.

The geographical science of the ancient world culminated in Ptolemy, who flourished in Egypt in the second century A.D. and was the author of the celebrated *Geographike Syntaxis*. His views on Central Asia are especially dealt with in Chapter III. As regards China, there is a distinct recognition of a sea-route leading to it; but Ptolemy was unaware that its eastern provinces bordered on an ocean. He also shows an immense eastern extension of the continent of Asia which was an error. For some five or six centuries after the break-up of the ancient world in the sixth century geographical science was at a very low ebb in Christendom. It is true that, throughout this period, thousands of men and women went on pilgrimage to Palestine, but these devout pilgrims seldom noted matters of geographical interest. They were so intent on worshipping at shrines that their minds were closed to most things not directly connected with their main object. Indeed pilgrim-travel was distinctly unprogressive and unfruitful from the wider point of view. To quote Shenstone:

The pilgrim who travels all day  
To visit some far-distant shrine  
If he bear but a relic away  
Is happy nor heard to repine.

The mentality of the pilgrim is illustrated by the belief that wood of the 'True Cross' could preserve a city from its be-



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siegers, while the nails possessed the power of stilling storms!

At this period the classical tradition was in eclipse, and Herodotus and Ptolemy were forgotten. Their successor was Cosmas 'Indicopleustes', or 'The Traveller to India', who flourished early in the fifth century. This remarkable individual was probably so named because his work was devoted to a description of the *Cosmos*. He was apparently a native of Alexandria, possibly of Greek descent, a merchant in his early years, and, later on, a monk. His voyages are referred to in Chapter IV. Here we deal with his views as the first geographer of Christendom. According to his *Universal Christian Topography*,<sup>1</sup> the universe was a flat parallelogram. In the centre was situated our world, surrounded by the ocean, beyond which was another world from which Noah came in the Ark. To the north of our world was a high mountain, around which the sun and moon revolved, thus producing night and day. Here we have, of course, the old Babylonian theory.

The purpose of Cosmas was to construct a world in which Jerusalem was the central point, basing that statement on the verse of the Prophet Ezekiel which runs: 'Thus saith the Lord God; This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries that are round about her'.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, since the Babylonian cosmological theory held that the earth was a hemispherical dome-shaped mountain rising from the cosmic ocean, Jerusalem at the centre was assumed to be at the highest point. Cosmas, accordingly, denied the sphericity of the world. He also denounced the theory of the Antipodes as blasphemous. Generally speaking, this period

<sup>1</sup> For Cosmas I have consulted *The Christian Topography of Cosmas*, by J. W. McCrindle (Hakluyt Society).

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel v, 5.

## *Introduction*

is marked by a widespread decay of knowledge, the classical scientific beliefs being replaced by such fantastic cosmogonies as that of Cosmas, based mainly upon the crude ideas of the Jewish writers of the Old Testament. And yet these grotesque maps were the precursors of the scientific map and chart. The prevailing identification of geographical science with theology may be further exemplified by St. Isidore of Seville, who solemnly debated whether the stars had souls, and, if so, what would be their position on the Day of Judgement? Possibly he based his views on the verse in Job which runs: 'When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy'.<sup>1</sup>

But new blood was coming into Europe from the North. The Vikings, virile barbarians, were conquering the effete rulers of Western and Eastern Europe and, after much destruction, began to revitalise the nations and to lead Europe in her advance towards recovery. The beginning of the second millennium A.D. marks the end of the darkest period in Europe. Of special importance was the knowledge of Greek science, regained from translations of the Greek philosophers into Arabic, made by the pagans and Christians of Syria, and their retranslation into Latin. These rediscovered works began to influence thinkers, who were no longer wholly dependent on the Scriptures for their geographical conceptions. It was also the period of the Crusaders, headed in many cases by recently converted Norsemen, who captured Jerusalem and, in 1099, for a while, established a Latin kingdom in Syria. Although the attempt to retain the Holy Land ultimately ended in failure, yet, as will be shown in Chapter V, the Crusades made for enlighten-

<sup>1</sup> xxxviii, 7.



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ment and progress. We shall also read how the Crusader St. Louis despatched Rubruquis on a mission which took him to Karakoram, the far-distant capital of the Mongols.

To turn to scientific beliefs, Adam of Bremen, who wrote geographical works about 1070, was a typical scholar of the period. He firmly believed in the sphericity of the earth, but, equally firmly, believed in the surrounding infinite and terrible Ocean of the ancient geographers. A leading thinker of the thirteenth century was Roger Bacon, who, as we shall see, met Rubruquis. In his celebrated *Opus Majus*, accepting the Greek scientists, he holds that the Western Ocean was not extensive and that the disposition of land and water on the other side of the Northern Hemisphere was probably similar to that on 'this side' of the globe. He also, addressing the religious authorities, asked for their support for geographical science, in order to establish the home of the lost tribes and the residence of Antichrist! Yet, in spite of the progress described above, fanaticism was still very powerful. Were not the works of Aristotle burned by the University of the Sorbonne in 1220?

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the chief writer on geographical and astronomical speculations was Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly (1330-1420). The rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Syntaxis Geographike*, translated into Latin in 1410, was available to d'Ailly, who also incorporated in his books the principal writers on geography, Greek, Latin and Arab. Views on cosmogony, as given in the *Imago Mundi*, run: 'The earth is spherical and the western ocean is relatively small. Aristotle pretends, contrary to Ptolemy, that more than a quarter of the whole globe is inhabited, and Averroes sustains the same opinion. Ptolemy also affirms that the extent of sea is small

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between the coast of Spain in the West and the shores of India in the East. We are not concerned here with the actual Spain, but with the Further Spain which is Africa.' <sup>1</sup> Finally, he states that Africa is obviously not far distant from India since elephants are found in both countries. Such, then, were the scientific views of the Middle Ages, but yet, suddenly, a few years before the close of the fifteenth century, Europe found salvation by the almost simultaneous discovery of the Ocean routes to India and to the New World. She burst the shackles of the Middle Ages and, thanks mainly to sea power, gradually evolved the power and wealth of the modern world.

<sup>1</sup> D'Ailly took this quotation bodily from the *Opus Majus* of Roger Bacon, as described in Chapter V, p. 78.





CHAPTER I

THE EARLIEST EUROPEAN EXPLORERS IN ASIA

As when a gryphon through the wilderness  
With wingèd course, o'er hill or moory dale,  
Pursues the Arimaspan, who by stealth  
Had from his wakeful custody purloined  
The guarded gold.

MILTON, *Paradise Lost*, bk. ii, l. 944

## CHAPTER I

### THE EARLIEST EUROPEAN EXPLORERS IN ASIA

IN very early times, the vast extent of the distance which separated the Mediterranean Sea from the Pacific Ocean prevented all direct intercourse between the peoples and, consequently, the civilisation of Europe and of China developed independently and in complete isolation. At first there was no knowledge of the existence of the other race on the part of either, but trade existed in Central Asia, even in the fourth millennium B.C., when, as Woolley points out, Sumer imported lapis lazuli from distant Badakhshan<sup>1</sup> and paid for it with goods made by the skilled craftsmen of Ur. We possess no recorded intercourse with China at this period; but, owing to the existence of a similar prehistoric art throughout Asia from the Mediterranean to the Hoang-ho,<sup>2</sup> we are justified in believing that there were trade routes running across Asia in very early days, even if merchants did not cross the entire continent of Asia, but bartered their wares at trade marts in Central Asia or elsewhere. All honour to these early traders!

During the last fifty years our knowledge of the geography and history of Central Asia and China has increased to such an extent that we are able to lay down the routes of ancient travellers whose reports were regarded by our predecessors in the

<sup>1</sup> In *The Sumerians*, p. 46, Woolley makes the slight error of placing the lapis lazuli mines in the Pamirs instead of in Badakhshan. He points out that the trade mart for this product was situated beneath Kuh-i-Demavand, probably near the site of prehistorical Rhages.

<sup>2</sup> René Grousset, *The Civilisation of the East*, vol. i, p. 25.



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field as fables rather than as serious attempts to give valuable information. Indeed, so far as my experience goes, the more the ancient writers are studied, the more their essential honesty and truthfulness are proved. It is thus only appropriate that we owe to Herodotus, the 'Father of Geography', the earliest account of a trade route running across Asia, which proves his deep study of the question. To quote: 'Aristeas, son of Caystrobios, a native of Proconnesus, says in the course of his poem that rapt by Phoebus he went as far as the Issedons. Above them dwelt the Arimaspi, men with one eye; still further, the gold-guarding griffins; and beyond these the Hyperboreans, who extended to the sea. Except the Hyperboreans, all these nations, beginning with the Arimaspi, were continually encroaching upon their neighbours.'

Aristeas of Proconnesus probably lived in the seventh century B.C., and his somewhat vague account is supported in detail by Herodotus as regards the region as far east as the country of the Argippaei, who were neighbours of the Issedons.<sup>1</sup> To quote him once again: 'Up to this point the territory of which we are speaking is very completely explored, and all the nations between the coast and the bald-headed men are well known to us. For some of the Scythians are accustomed to penetrate as far, of whom enquiry may easily be made, or of Greeks from the trading station on the Borysthenes (Dnieper), and from other trading stations along the Euxine.'

The caravan route as described by Herodotus started from Tanais (the medieval Tana), a trade mart situated at the mouth of the river Don, which was the boundary between the Scyth-

<sup>1</sup> I would here acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr G. F. Hudson's brilliant work, *Europe and China*, and to Mr Arnold Lawrence's valuable notes in his *Herodotus*. Proconnesus is the island of Marmora.

## *The Earliest European Explorers in Asia*

ians and the Sauromatae. The latter tribe, we are told, 'beginning at the upper end of Lake Maeotis, stretch northward a distance of fifteen days' journey, inhabiting a country which is entirely bare of trees, whether wild or cultivated'.<sup>1</sup> Above them, possessing the second region, dwelt the Budini, whose territory was thickly wooded with trees of every kind. Beyond the Budini there was a desert area seven days' journey across, and farther eastward still, a race of hunters, the Thyssagetae. 'In the same region are the people who bear the name Iyrcae; they also support themselves by hunting.' Their method was remarkable and merits quotation: 'The hunter climbs a tree, the whole country abounding in wood, and there sets himself in ambush; he has a dog at hand, and a horse, trained to lie down upon its belly, and thus make itself low; the hunter keeps watch, and when he sees his game, lets fly an arrow; then mounting his horse, he gives the beast chase, his dog following hard all the while'. A gold plaque from Siberia illustrates this method of hunting.<sup>2</sup>

Traversing the region of the Sauromatae would bring the traveller to the wooded area of the Volga, beyond which great river lay the desert of Obshhi Syrt. Thence the route is clear to Orenburg, situated on the river Ural, termed by Carpini the *Iaec*, a name obviously derived from the Iyrcae. 'The tract of land whereof I have been speaking', continues Herodotus, 'is all smooth plain, and the soil deep; beyond lies a region which is rugged and stony. After passing over a great extent of this country, people are found dwelling at the foot of lofty moun-

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence points out that 'Tanais' and 'Don' both represent an Iranian word for 'river'. Hudson explains that Herodotus was ignorant of the great eastern bend of the Don which made the general direction run north-east.

<sup>2</sup> Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, fig. 201.



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tains. They are said to be all—both men and women—bald from their birth, to have flat noses, and large chins. . . . No one harms these people, for they are looked upon as sacred, they do not even possess any warlike weapon. . . . They are called the Argippaeans.' This description of the Ural Mountains between Samara and Orenburg, *pace* the old commentators, is correct. I recollect my surprise at reaching the summit of the range, where, on two great boundary stones, were chiselled 'Europe' and 'Asia' respectively, without passing through a tunnel. In fact, I travelled by train from Moscow across the Ural Mountains past the Aral Sea to the railway terminus in distant Farghana without passing through a single tunnel. 'Beyond the bald-headed men lies a region of which no one can give an exact account. Lofty and precipitous mountains, which are never crossed, bar further progress.' Here, *pace* the older commentators once again, the Altai range with its perpetual snow and formidable glaciers is obviously indicated and not the Ural Mountains.

Continuing our survey, we can locate the Issedons, the neighbours of the Argippaei, who may be identified with the Wusun, in the neighbourhood of Hami. Ptolemy places them in the region of Lop Nor, which more or less corroborates Herodotus, who mentioned that they ate their dead parents, were law-abiding, and that their women had equal authority. Aristaeas states that he did not penetrate farther east than the Issedons, but he refers to the information gained about the Arimaspi, after whom he named his Travel-poem. In a fragment of it we read "Above us to the north", say the Issedons, "dwell men whose borders march with ours; many are they and mighty warriors indeed, rich in horses, wealthy in sheep, wealthy in cattle; but only one eye in his fair forehead has each



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of the shaggy-haired ones, sturdiest of men." ' Herodotus writes that the northern parts of Europe are very much richer in gold than any other region, but declines to accept the story that the Arimaspi steal it from the griffins. We may, I think, explain the epithet of 'one-eyed' as being merely one of contempt of townsmen for nomads,<sup>1</sup> while the gold undoubtedly came from the Altai range, in which connexion Altain-ola signifies 'Golden Mountains'.

Hudson draws attention to the probability of the existence of a sanctuary in the country of the 'sacred' Argippaei, in honour of Argimpasa, the Scythian Aphrodite. This would certainly favour the establishment of a trade mart, at which wares from the west would be exchanged for gold. We may, I think, identify the Arimaspi, who are dwellers in Mongolia, with the powerful Hiung-nu. They played a leading part on the stage of Central Asia and will appear again more than once in this work.

Finally, beyond the country of the nomadic Arimaspi, our survey ends with the Hyperboreans, 'the dwellers beyond the North Wind', 'who extended to the sea'. Legends relating to the Hyperboreans are various and contradictory. The best known is that given by Herodotus of the two damsels who brought their offerings to the shrine of Apollo at Delos. Apollo was undoubtedly a northern god, who was believed to spend the summer months in revisiting his home, with the result that no oracles were obtainable at Delphi during the absence of the god. This legend has obviously nothing to do with the information obtained by Aristéas. It is possible, nay, probable, on the

<sup>1</sup> A Chinese proverb runs that they alone possess two eyes, that the Europeans are one-eyed and that the rest of mankind is blind.

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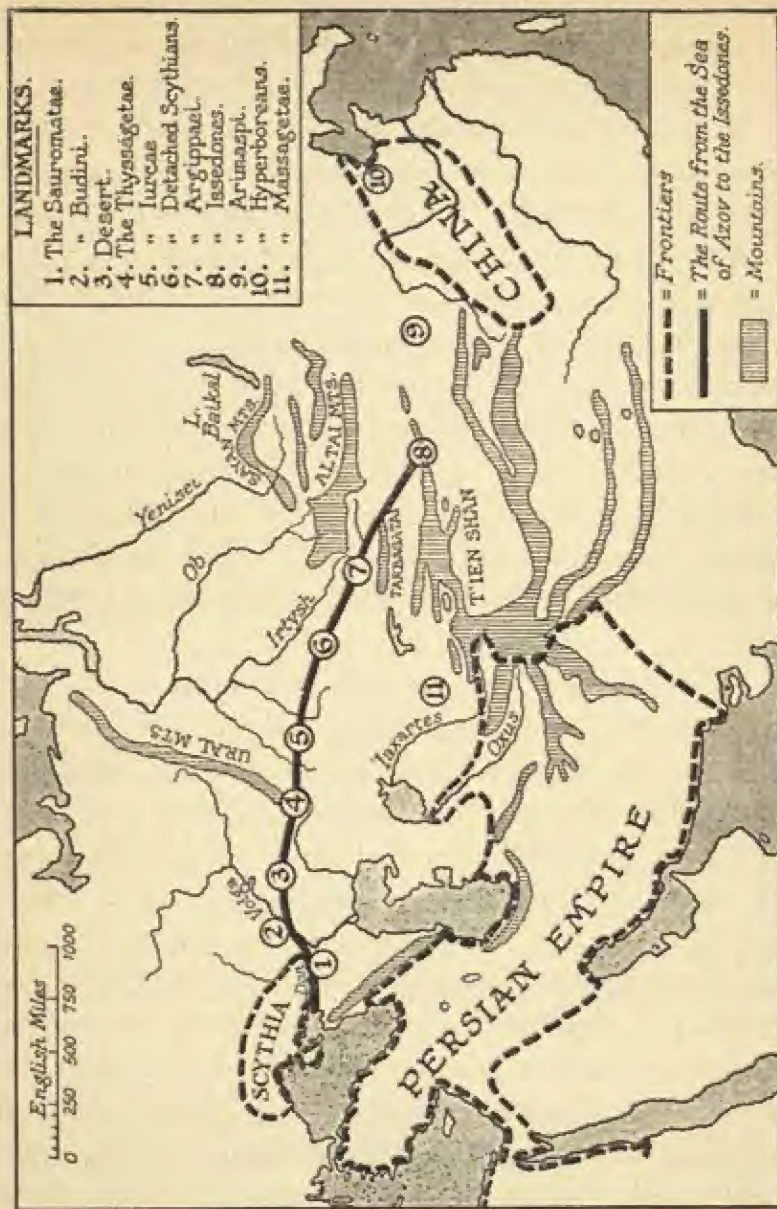
other hand, that Aristeeas heard stories of the Chinese from traders among the nomads. It may be objected that the Chinese did not dwell beyond the North Wind, but it must be remembered that Herodotus naturally assumed a northern situation for Scythia, where, as he wrote, the winter of exceeding rigour continues for eight months and during the other four it is cold. It seems then, that, strengthened by the law of exclusion, which excludes any country situated in the frozen north, the Chinese were the 'dwellers beyond the North Wind'.

This then constitutes the earliest description, vague it is true, but yet authentic, of the trade route running from the Black Sea across lands peopled by nomads, who were continually encroaching upon their neighbours, to the settled kingdom of China; and to Aristeeas, an inhabitant of the island of Marmora, is due the credit of being the first civilised European to report its existence.

The next European explorer to reach Central Asia was Alexander the Great, who thereby opened up a new world to the knowledge of mankind. Starting on his great expedition in 334 B.C., he traversed Asia Minor and, in 333, overthrew Darius at the battle of Issus, one of the decisive battles of the world, which was fought in a small plain on the mainland opposite Cyprus. After capturing Tyre and annexing Egypt in 331, Alexander resumed his advance eastwards. Crossing the Euphrates and then the Tigris, he administered the *coup de grâce* to the cowardly Darius Codomannus close to the ruins of ancient Nineveh at the battle of Arbela.<sup>1</sup> The occupation of Babylon and Susa followed. So far the country was known to

<sup>1</sup> For these campaigns *vide* Sykes, *History of Persia* (3rd ed.), chs. xx-xxiii. Arbela, the modern Erbil, which has given its name to the battle, is situated some seventy miles to the south of the actual battlefield.





TRADE ROUTE ACROSS ASIA IN THE TIME OF HERODOTUS





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Greek travellers, including Herodotus, but from Susa the great conqueror ascended to the Iranian plateau, and occupied the spring capital of the Achaemenians at Persepolis.

From Persepolis his next objective was Ecbatana, the ancient capital of Media, and the modern Hamadan. Darius, who had fled to this city after Arbela, again fled eastwards, hoping to escape to distant Bactria. But he was assassinated, and Alexander overtook the Achaemenian monarch, who had just died, near Damghan, some two hundred miles east of Rei. His next objective was the classical Hyrcania, situated near the Caspian Sea, and made famous for its fertility by Strabo. Alexander then followed up the Gurgan River. I have traced his route to the famous Kalposh meadow, where the villagers insist that the great conqueror grazed his horses. From this centre he descended into the valley of the Kashaf Rud and received the submission of Satibarzanes, the Satrap of the Areians, at Susia, the medieval Tus, and the home of the epic poet Firdausi.

At Susia, Alexander heard that Bessus, the murderer of Darius, had assumed the title and tiara of the Great King. He immediately decided to attack him in Bactria, and was already well on his way across what is now northern Afghanistan, to its capital Bactra, when he heard that Satibarzanes had rebelled and killed the Macedonian envoy and his escort. Immediately making a forced march westwards, Alexander crushed the rebellion. He then changed his plans and marched south to the delta province of Drangiana (now Sistan). Thence he followed up the Etyrmander (the modern Helmand) and then the Argandab, founding an Alexandria Arachosia not far from this latter river. He then marched north to Koppen, the Kabul Valley, as did the British in the First Afghan War more than 2000 years later.

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Close to the main range, across which he had already marched in his expedition into Hyrcania, yet another city was founded and named Alexandria ad Caucasum. Crossing this formidable mountain barrier, which was termed Paropanisus and also the Indian Caucasus,<sup>1</sup> Alexander descended into Bactria, the modern Badakhshan, and occupied Bactra, the medieval Balkh, which was the most easterly of the great Persian cities. Alexander then crossed the Oxus and advanced to the Jaxartes, the modern Sir Daria. There he founded Alexandria *Eschate*, or 'The Furthest', the modern Khojand. When visiting that city some twenty years ago, I studied my atlas and found that it was situated some 3500 miles east of Hellas. What that meant before the era of railways and motor cars can perhaps be realised when I mention that, in Persia, I travelled, using mules or camels, at the rate of about one hundred miles per week. Troops would certainly average less than fifteen miles a day for six days, allowing one day's halt per week.

Alexander had some stiff fighting during the two years he spent in Central Asia, and suffered his only disaster, a Macedonian division having been cut to pieces near Samarcand, which disaster was speedily avenged. The capture of the Sogdian rock was a great feat of arms, his men scaling its precipitous sides by climbing up iron pegs driven into the rocks. Among the prisoners was Roxana, daughter of the Chief, whom he subsequently married. Alexander thus beat the boundaries of the Achaemenian Empire and, in continuation of the policy of the Great Kings, he garrisoned Central Asia with strong forces. It is interesting to note that their descendants

<sup>1</sup> Classical and early medieval travellers alike believed that a single great range crossed Asia from the Caucasus eastwards.



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founded the Bactrian kingdom which, in 256 B.C., broke away from the Seleucid Empire and ruled firstly in Bactria and later, as we shall see, in the Kabul Valley.

Strabo, who flourished in the first century B.C., declares that the Bactrian Greeks 'extended their empire as far as the Seres and the Phauni'.<sup>1</sup> Here we have a very early mention of the Chinese, while the Phauni may be identified with the Hiung-nu, or Huns. It is most unlikely that the Bactrians actually reached China, but the reference may well have been to Khotan, where the silk industry was apparently established in early times by a Chinese princess. Nearly two years had been spent in subduing and organising the eastern provinces of the Persian Empire. Alexander then recrossed the Paropanisus range and prepared to invade India. His operations in Central Asia had been watched with keen apprehension by Taxiles, king of the Northern Punjab, who appeared in person to make his submission. The main Macedonian army marched by a route that lay to the north of the Khyber Pass, but Alexander led a picked force up the Kunar Valley and finally captured by assault Aornos, situated in a bend of the Indus—his greatest feat of arms.<sup>2</sup> Rejoining the main body, Alexander crossed the Indus and, traversing the Punjab, met a worthy opponent on the Hydaspes (Jhelum) in Porus, whom he defeated, captured and reinstated in his kingdom.

Alexander reached his limit of conquest at the River Beas. He wished to march into the Ganges Valley, but his veterans mutinied, and so perforce he gave the order to march homewards. The great army started down the Jhelum and so to the Indus in the autumn of 326 B.C. on a march of nine hundred miles

<sup>1</sup> Strabo, xi, 516.

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* Sir Aurel Stein, *On Alexander's Track to the Indus*.

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to the sea which took nearly a year to accomplish. Alexander sailed on the Indian Ocean, where he sacrificed to Poseidon and prayed the god to grant Nearchus, whom he had appointed to command the fleet, a successful voyage to Persia. He decided to march through Baluchistan and to keep in touch with the fleet as far as possible. However, the Ras Malan forced him to turn inland and, to quote Arrian, 'blazing heat and want of water destroyed a great part of the army'. I have travelled in the coastal districts of Baluchistan in the early autumn and I can fully confirm Arrian's account. The army regained the coast near Pasni, where fresh water was found by digging wells in the seashore, which he followed as far as Gwadur. He then turned inland, and at Pura, situated in the Bampur Valley,<sup>1</sup> he was able to rest his worn-out veterans and to regain touch with his Persian governors.

From Pura Alexander followed down the Bampur River to where its waters commingle with those of the Halil Rud in a lake known as the Jaz Morian, which I discovered some forty years ago when tracing the route followed by Alexander. A standing camp was formed in this valley, where not only did Nearchus report the safety of the fleet, which was drawn up at Harmozia, the medieval Hormuz, but Craterus, who had been despatched with the elephants and baggage, also rejoined the main body after marching up the Bolan Pass, down the Helmand to Sistan and across the desert to the valley of the Halil Rud. The great expedition was nearing its end, the main body marching along the coast in touch with the fleet while Alex-

<sup>1</sup> The capital is now termed Iran-Shahr. It used to be called Pahrā. *Vide* Sir Aurel Stein, 'Archaeological Reconnaissances in Southern Persia', *G. J.*, vol. lxxxiii, no. 2, Feb. 1934.



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ander with a picked force marched by a direct route across Persia. Finally, at Susa, the greatest expedition of all time terminated in triumphal rejoicings and in weddings between the Macedonian nobles and Persian ladies of high degree.

In this brief sketch I have merely outlined the route followed and surveyed by Alexander for thousands of miles across Asia. When we consider the formation of cantonments of Macedonian troops all over the vast Persian Empire, who must have explored the surrounding districts, the constant march of reinforcements and the enormous effect on commerce of the dispersal of the Achaemenian gold hoards, it is difficult to overestimate the importance to civilisation of these campaigns, which constituted a new era in exploration and greatly enlarged the outlook of the Greek world. Yet it is noteworthy that Alexander never realised the existence of the Chinese Empire to the east nor of Siberia to the north. To quote Tarn: 'India to Alexander, when he invaded it, meant the country of the Indus, which, following Aristotle, he thought was a broad-based peninsula jutting *eastward* into the sea from the land-mass of Iran. Along the north side of it, like a backbone, ran a chain of mountains, Aristotle's "Parnassus" [*i.e.* Paropanisus]; the rest was a plain traversed by the Indus and its tributaries. Ocean, which was near the Jaxartes, washed the northern base of these mountains and flowed round the eastern end of the peninsula'.<sup>1</sup> Such, then, was the state of the geographical knowledge of Asia in the fourth century B.C. The Greeks had obviously forgotten, or had failed to realise, the importance of the journey of Aristeas.

<sup>1</sup> W. W. Tarn, *Alexander: The Conquest of the Far East* (Cambridge Ancient History).





CHAPTER II

THE FIRST CHINESE EXPLORERS

The associations of Central Asia are for me incurably romantic. I think of Chengiz Khan and of Marco Polo; of the Silk Route with its caravans of camels passing out of the Jade Gate on their long journey to Antioch; of Rustum and Sohrab; of Chinese pilgrims crossing the Central Asian deserts to the holy places of India; of Babur and his delectable little kingdom of Farghana in the very middle of Asia, where the melons were so luscious and the horses so fiery.

LAURENCE BINYON



## CHAPTER II

### THE FIRST CHINESE EXPLORERS

IN the last chapter I have dealt with Europeans penetrating into Central Asia, but before describing the explorations undertaken from China towards the west, it is desirable to refer to the various names by which that country was called. The name of Seres or Serice, which is the older name to be used by Europeans approaching China by land, signifies the Silk Country.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the words used for silk in Western Asia and in Europe are all based on the Chinese word *sir*. On the other hand, Thin, Sin, Sinae figure in the tales told by seafarers who reached this distant land after the longest of voyages, as we shall see in the next chapter. It is generally held to be derived from the Tsin or Chin dynasty, which ruled in the third century B.C., but it is probable that the word is much older and that the Sinim of the Prophet Isaiah refers to China.

We reach firm ground in the person of Chin-shih Huang-Ti of the Chin dynasty, who, in the middle of the third century B.C., broke up the feudal system and made China a unified state. This remarkable ruler successfully fought the nomad tribes to the north. He also constructed the Great Wall, which was undoubtedly responsible for repulsing the assaults of the Hiung-nu and other nomads and thereby turning their hordes westwards. In China the proverb still runs: 'Chin-shih Huang-Ti is dead but the Wall still stands'.

<sup>1</sup> I would acknowledge my great indebtedness for nearly half a century to Sir Henry Yule's *Cathay and the Way Thither* and to his *Marco Polo*, both of which invaluable works were brought up to date by the late Henri Cordier.

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The Chinese had no knowledge of Western Asia or of Europe until about 140 B.C., when the Emperor Wu-ti of the Han dynasty, which had succeeded the Chin family, ascended the throne. It was a period of most important movements of the tribes which had reactions throughout Central Asia, and far beyond. The protagonists were the Hiung-nu and the Yue-chi living to the north of the Nan-shan in the Western Kansu of to-day. The Yue-chi were finally driven into flight and, about 165 B.C., invaded the territories of the Wu-sun, the Issedons of Herodotus, in the valley of the Ili, and of their neighbours to the west, the Sakae. The Yue-chi, not feeling sufficiently distant from the Hiung-nu, did not wish to hold the Ili valley, but seized the country of the Sakae, who, fleeing westwards, occupied Sogdiana. The Hiung-nu, in alliance with the Wu-sun, again attacked the Yue-chi, who again fled west and, about 140 B.C., conquered both Sogdiana and Bactria. The Greek dynasty of Bactria, unable to resist with any success, withdrew over the Himalayas to the Kabul Valley, while the Sakae broke up, one body settling in Sistan, to which delta province they gave its name, while the main body formed states in Sind.

Such was the position when the Emperor Wu-ti, in 138 B.C., despatched Chang Kien, the earliest known Chinese traveller, to the west. The Emperor had heard from Hiung-nu prisoners of the defeat of the Yue-chi by their king, who had made a drinking-cup out of the skull of his rival, but he was unaware of the second defeat of the Yue-chi, and was most anxious to induce this tribe to attack the Hiung-nu, who were his most formidable enemies. Chang Kien had no luck. Hardly had he crossed the frontier than he was seized by the Hiung-nu, who kept him a prisoner for ten years. He then escaped to the state







A TANG HORSE

Pottery model from the tomb of the Chancellor Lin (*d.* A.D. 728)  
Chinese: T'ang dynasty. British Museum: Eumorfopoulos Collection

## *The First Chinese Explorers*

of Farghana, where he was well received and noted that the name of China was known and respected by the Ta-yuan, who wished to open up relations with its ruler. Continuing his interrupted mission, the Chinese ambassador finally reached the Yue-chi in the vicinity of Bokhara, who, as was only to be expected, entirely refused to listen to the proposals of the Chinese ambassador. Upon his return journey the intrepid Chang Kien was again captured by the Hiung-nu, but, in 126, he returned to China with political and geographical information of the greatest value. He also introduced the vine and lucerne clover into China.<sup>1</sup>

The Han dynasty, at this period, attacked the Hiung-nu with much success, driving them away to the north, with the result that China advanced across the grim Gobi to Lop-nor. To support this forward policy, Wu-ti extended the earlier 'Great Wall' of the Chin dynasty, and established military colonies along it. The Han dynasty attained the zenith of its power by the conquest of Farghana in 102 B.C.—a magnificent feat of arms which raises a distinctly interesting question. Chang Kien in his report on Farghana especially mentioned their 'many excellent horses': 'These are blood-sweating steeds whose stock is the offspring of Supernatural Horses'.<sup>2</sup> The Emperor was naturally anxious to secure some of this famous stock, but, for one reason or another, the missions he despatched were not successful. However, he sent yet another mission, amply supplied with money, with a statuette of a

<sup>1</sup> In the recent Exhibition of Chinese Art, 'wine vessels' of a much earlier period were exhibited, but this beverage was made from fermented rice, not from grapes.

<sup>2</sup> Vide a valuable article on 'The Horse: a Factor in Early Chinese History', by Professor W. Percival Yetts, *Eurasia Septentrionalis Antiqua*, ix, 1934.



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horse in gold as a special gift. In return he requested the King of Farghana to give him some of his famous horses.

The people of Farghana, loath to part with their best stock and considering that the distance and the deserts made them safe from attack by a Chinese army, refused to accede to the Emperor's request. The Chinese envoys, furious at the failure of their mission, broke in pieces the golden horse and departed, breathing threats of vengeance. They were, in consequence, killed on the frontier of Farghana. When news of this dire insult was reported to Wu-ti, he determined both to inflict punishment and to secure the horses. Accordingly, in 104 B.C., he despatched an army which, characteristically enough, was recruited from the riff-raff of the provinces. This expedition, partly owing to the destruction of the crops in China by locusts and by the arid and waterless nature of the Gobi, dwindled down to a few thousand worn-out men, who, upon reaching the borders of Farghana, suffered a severe defeat. The Emperor, however, was undaunted and, in 102, a second and a better organised force reached Farghana, where it defeated the local forces and followed up this success by breaching the outer wall of the capital.

Negotiations for peace followed, the King's head being cut off and sent as an acceptable offering to the invaders. As a result, the Chinese obtained possession of 'several tens of excellent horses and, besides, more than 3000 stallions and mares of medium and inferior breeds'. It would be of considerable interest to ascertain the origin of these 'supernatural horses'. The ponies of the Huing-nu and other nomad tribes may be ruled out of court, both owing to their shape and to the account given above. We know that Scythians bringing horses from



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Farghana appear among the tribute-bearers at Persepolis. There is also the Greek strain introduced into Bactria by Alexander the Great, which is mentioned by Marco Polo, who praises the horses of Badakhshan. To-day they are the outstanding horses of Central Asia, and when travelling in Central Asia I rode no other. However this may be and whatever the origin of the Farghana horses, there is every reason to believe that the famous Tang horses were the descendants of the 'blood-sweating Supernatural Horses' of Farghana. To resume, after this decisive victory, that must have resounded across Asia, imposing embassies with large escorts were repeatedly despatched to the states west of Farghana. The gifts with which the ambassadors were amply furnished invariably consisted of silk tissues, which were highly esteemed. Gradually, then, by force of arms, aided by diplomacy, the demand for silk led to the establishment of the famous Silk Route which ran across the Gobi to Lop-nor and Khotan, Yarkand and Farghana, with an alternative northerly route by way of Hami and Kashgar. To protect this important trade route, a chain of forts was constructed and garrisoned in the Gobi, which Stein re-discovered in 1907.

More than one of these embassies penetrated to Parthia, which is termed An-sih, the Chinese form of Arsaces, the name of the ruling dynasty. The envoys describe Parthia as a country of vast extent, producing rice, wheat and the vine, and state that the cities were walled. Reference is made to the use of silver coins bearing the effigy of the monarch. It was also reported 'that they make signs on leather from side to side by way of literary record'. As the Chinese write from top to bottom, a horizontal script would naturally be noticed. No mention is

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made of the Roman Empire in these reports. Return embassies bringing 'great birds' eggs and clever Li-kien conjurers to offer to Han' are mentioned, Li-kien being apparently Syria. It is extremely interesting to note that Mithradates II, who ruled Parthia from 124 to 88 B.C., not only received the first Chinese embassy, but also opened up relations with Rome.

In the early years of the first century A.D., the Han dynasty declined and Chinese power in her Central Asian dominions, which must have constituted a constant drain on her resources, was at a very low ebb. However, it was revived by that great general and administrator Pan Chao, whose tomb I visited at Kashgar. Pan Chao commenced his brilliant career in Central Asia about A.D. 73, and, by means of campaigns and missions, extended Chinese influence as far west as the Caspian Sea. In 97 he despatched an envoy with instructions to visit Parthia and Rome. Kan Ying, as he was named, travelled to Iraq by way of Hecatompylos (near modern Damghan) and Hamadan. He intended to proceed from Iraq to Constantinople by the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Akaba, and so to Petra and Syria. But, to quote from the *Hou-han-shu*, 'When he was about to take his passage across the great sea, the sailors told him that the sea was very vast, that it could be traversed within three months, but with unfavourable winds might take two years . . . that there was something in the sea which made a man long for home, and that many men lost their lives on it. When he heard this, Ying did not go any farther.'

Kan Ying was neither a brave nor an able emissary, for he never heard of the overland route to the Roman Empire, since a later Chinese work mentions that it was not known to exist. One result of this embassy was the organisation by China of a











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mounted force equipped and armed on the Parthian model, while to some extent the art of both countries was mutually influenced.

In the middle of the fifth century A.D. a Chinese embassy again reached Iran, now called Po-sz, and ruled by the great Sasanian dynasty. Their report ran: 'Posz has its capital at Suh-li [Ctesiphon] . . . with over one hundred thousand households. The land produces gold, silver, coral, amber, very fine pearls and glass; crystals, diamonds, iron, copper, cinnabar, mercury. They have white elephants, lions and great birds' eggs; there is a bird shaped like a camel, having two wings which enable it to fly along, but not to rise. It eats grass and flesh, and can also swallow fire.' It is interesting to note that the ostrich is still termed the 'Camel Bird' in Iran. The ambassadors were particularly struck by the magnificence of the King, wearing a crown studded with jewels, and seated on a golden throne, supported by lions cast in the same metal.

Buddhism was introduced into China by the Yue-chi at the commencement of the Christian era, and led to many important journeys and pilgrimages to India. The greatest of these pilgrim-explorers was Hsuan-tsang, who determined 'to travel in the countries of the West, to question the wise men on the points that were troubling his mind'. Refused permission by the Emperor, in 629 the 'Master of the Law' calmly started alone to cross the Gobi. Finding the track by the skeletons of camels and their droppings, he was shot at when drinking at the spring close to one of the frontier forts described above. But, being brought before the officer in command, he persuaded him to supply him with provisions and also with introductions to officers at other posts. This was done, but he was warned to

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avoid approaching the last post, whose commanding officer would have arrested him. Observing this injunction, the unhappy pilgrim lost his way and very nearly his life. But fortunately his horse scented a pool of water and Hsuan finally reached Hami, more dead than alive.

He was the recipient of embarrassing hospitality at Turfan, whose king wished to keep his guest permanently. However, in 330, he reached the camp of the Western Turks, whose Great Khan forwarded him to Shash (now Tashkent) and so to Samarkand. Crossing the Oxus he entered Bactria, and from Balkh he made for Bamian, where he mentions the two gigantic statues of the Buddha, which are still in existence.

Here Hsuan was in a great Buddhist centre, and reaching the fertile district of Kapisa, where he was welcomed by its ruler, a devout Buddhist, he decided to spend the summer of 630 in these pleasant uplands. In the autumn he descended to Gandhara (the modern Peshawar), where, as Grousset points out, the first statue of the Buddha had been chiselled by a Greek sculptor. From Gandhara, Hsuan visited the Swat Valley and traversed the famous, but still unexplored, gorges of the Indus, sometimes 'on rope bridges, sometimes by clinging to chains'. Returning to the plains of India, he crossed the Indus and reached Taxila.

His wonderful journeys in India fall outside the scope of this work, but on his return journey he travelled across Badakhshan to Kashgar and Khotan, following the Silk Route. Finally, in 645, the obscure monk returned to China, where he was honoured by a magnificent official reception.

Hsuan-tsang was the greatest of early Asiatic travellers. He was, of course, a child of his generation who believed that





HSUAN-TSANG RETURNING TO CHINA  
WITH A LOAD OF MANUSCRIPTS

After a Chinese painting of the Sung dynasty.  
British Museum



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when crossing the desert in the night 'the demons and goblins raised fire-lights as many as the stars'. On the other hand, his descriptions of men and places prove a keen intellect and an almost modern point of view. I constantly referred to his work when travelling in Central Asia.

To complete these explorations, I now turn to the voyage of the monk I-Ching, who in 671 embarked in a Persian ship on his voyage to India. He duly reached Sumatra, where he studied Buddhism in its flourishing monasteries for eight months. He then continued his voyage in a ship of that island and, crossing the Bay of Bengal, coasted the Nicobar Islands, where the naked inhabitants brought fruit to barter for iron, and 'shot poisoned arrows if one refused to barter with them'. He finally landed at the port of Tamralipti, not far from the Ganges delta, where he studied Sanskrit for a year before penetrating into the interior. Like Hsuan-tsang, he made a great collection of Buddhist texts, and, upon his return to China, was also granted the honour of a public reception. It is of considerable interest to note that, in the Tang period, Chinese ships sailed as far as the Persian Gulf.

Looking back on the many centuries covered by this chapter, we see that China, by exploration, by force of arms and by diplomatic missions, broke through the barriers, which alike for the Achaemenians and for Alexander had been a mere cul-de-sac, and had created an Empire whose influence covered Central Asia to the Caspian Sea. She opened up peaceful relations with the Parthian and Sasanian dynasties of Iran and her indomitable explorers reached India both by land and sea, and thereby reflected lustre on the greatest empire in Asia.





CHAPTER III

ROME ESTABLISHES DIRECT INTERCOURSE  
WITH THE EAST

Why should I rehearse to thee those Aethiopian  
forests silvered with a soft fleece?  
Or how Chinese comb off leaves their delicate down?

VIRGIL, *Georgics*, ii, v. 120  
(trs. J. W. Mackail)



### CHAPTER III

#### ROME ESTABLISHES DIRECT INTERCOURSE WITH THE EAST

IN the previous chapter an attempt has been made to outline early explorations in Asia with their underlying urge of conquest and commerce. This period was succeeded by the organised commerce of Rome with the East, which was of great world importance.<sup>1</sup>

It is certain that silk first reached the Roman world through Parthia at some date in the first century B.C. by an overland route *via* Seleucia on the Tigris and Antioch. In Europe it was believed, as the motto to this chapter proves, that silk grew on trees, and the Chinese naturally made every effort to keep the secret and maintained a strict monopoly. About A.D. 174 Pausanias wrote that silk was spun by an insect 'twice as big as the biggest of beetles: but, in other respects, it resembles the spiders that spin under trees'. Yet two centuries later the historian Ammianus Marcellinus writes of the forests of the Seres: 'The trees of these forests furnish a product of a fleecy kind . . . which they card out in fine and slender threads . . . spinning these fibres they manufacture silk'. This constitutes a remarkable instance of the fluctuation of knowledge before the era of printing.

Before dealing with the silk trade, it may be of interest to point out that we owe to the island of Cos not only a succulent

<sup>1</sup> I have consulted *The Commerce between the Roman Empire and India*, by E. H. Warmington, a valuable work.

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lettuce but also the earliest silk-like insect product, from which were woven the *Coae vestes*, a diaphanous gauze. These delicate textiles were superseded by the Chinese silk gauzes of which Pliny wrote: 'So have the ends of the earth to be traversed: and all that a Roman dame may exhibit her charms in transparent gauze'.<sup>1</sup> Actually the Chinese close-textured silks were unravelled and made into gauze to suit the Roman ladies' taste. This gauze was even exported to China!

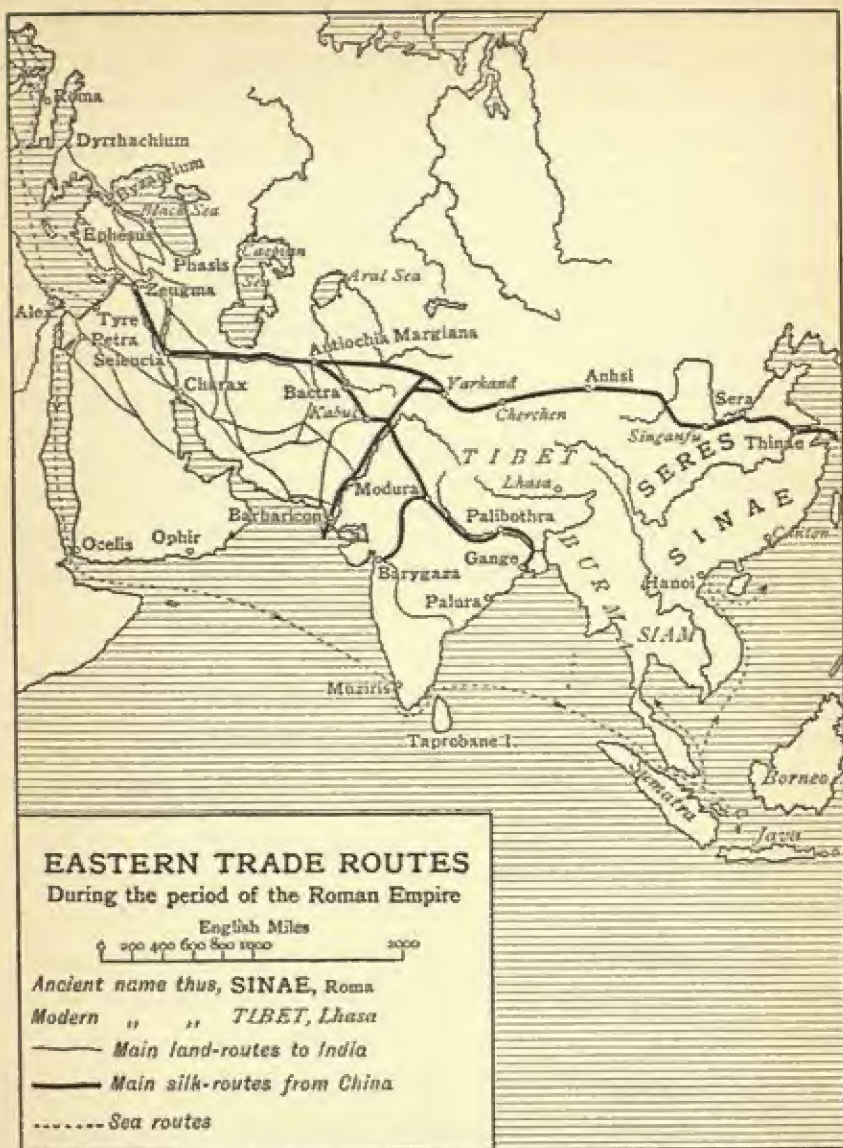
It was not until the reign of Augustus, who made Egypt his private domain, that direct Roman commerce with India and, to a certain extent, with the Far East was inaugurated by the Red Sea route. In furtherance of this policy, a Roman army landed in Hejaz in 25 B.C. under Aelius Gallus and marched through Negrana (the modern Nejran) to Marib, the capital of the Himyarite kingdom. Here the incense land of Hadramaut was not far distant, but the Roman general, disillusioned as to the supposed wealth of Arabia, marched back to the coast. He had, however, gained much valuable information on the commercial and political position in western Arabia, while Ptolemy took full advantage of his geographical discoveries.

It is interesting to turn for a while to the early navigation of these seas. During the reign of King Solomon, who ruled during the tenth century B.C., we read that 'the King had at sea a navy of Tharshish with the navy of Hiram: once in three years came the navy of Tharshish, bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes, and peacocks'.<sup>2</sup> Here we have an early account of trade with India and perhaps the earliest bill of lading.

<sup>1</sup> There is a story told of the Emperor Akbar, who objected to the indecent costume of one of his wives. In her defence she pointed out that she was wearing *nine* robes of Chinese 'woven wind'.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings x, 22.









## *Rome establishes Direct Intercourse with the East*

Tharshish was a port in India which maintained a close connexion with Tyre. In the sixth century B.C. Ezekiel wrote: 'The ships of Tharshish did sing of thee [Tyre] in thy market'.<sup>1</sup> In those early days ships bound for India coasted along the rugged shores of Arabia to Meshech, the port of Ophir (now Dhufar), and, rounding Ras-al-Hadd, changed to a north-westerly direction until, in the vicinity of sombre Ras-al-Musandim, the equally inhospitable coast of Makran was sighted. Sailing eastwards, Tiz was the chief port in this desolate country, and finally the Indian peninsula was reached.

At the beginning of the first century A.D. the ships engaged in the Indian trade, manned almost entirely by hardy Arab mariners, who were not affected by the superstitious fears of European sailors, followed the same route. But the discovery of the use of the monsoons in the middle of the first century by Hippalus was of enormous importance to navigation, and finally led to an open sea route from the Gulf of Aden to the port of Muziris on the Malabar coast. Moreover, a few Roman ships passed round Cape Comorin and, again using the monsoons, sailed through the Straits of Malacca to China.

In the anonymous *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, which was written in the middle of the first century A.D., we read: 'Behind this country [Chryse, *i.e.* Lower Burma and the Malay Peninsula] the sea comes to an end somewhere in Thin: and in the interior of that country, somewhat to the north, there is a very great city called Thinae, from which raw silk and silk thread and silk stuffs are brought overland through Bactria to Barygaza, the modern Broach, in the Gulf of Cambay, as they are, on

<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel xxvii, 25. In this chapter Ezekiel gives a remarkable account of the commercial geography of the period.

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the other hand, by the Ganges River to Limyrice [Coromandel Coast]. It is not easy, however, to reach Thin, and few and far between are those who come from it.' Here we have perhaps the earliest description of the sea route to China or Thin, the name by which the country was known to seafarers. Ptolemy mentions the 'harbour of the Sinae' at the head of the 'Great Gulf', which is believed to be Hanoi. But he did not realise that China looked on to a vast ocean.

Later, thanks to the Han annals, we hear of Roman merchants reaching China: 'The Ta-tsin [Roman] King always desired to open up relations with Han, but An-sih [Parthia] wished to trade with Rome in Han silk goods, so that he was obstructed and could not reach us until the ninth year of the Emperor Hwan's period [A.D. 166], when Antun [Marcus Aurelius Antoninus], King of Ta-tsin, sent an envoy *via* the parts beyond Jihnan,<sup>1</sup> with offerings of ivory, rhinoceros-horn and tortoise-shell'. This so-called embassy, bearing products of the East, was most probably the offering of an adventurous Roman merchant who pretended to be an official envoy. Hudson suggests that it was an enterprise to purchase silk in China, as the overland route had been completely interrupted by the Parthian campaigns.

Thus we have the sea routes competing with the land routes. Silk, as mentioned above, had first reached the Roman Empire by the overland routes which, from Khotan, Yarkand and Kashgar, districts of the province of Hsin Kiang, passed through Irkeshtum and crossed the Tian Shan by the Terek Davan Pass, to Farghana. From this fertile district it was carried through Samarcand, Merv, Hamadan and Seleucia

<sup>1</sup> A province of Tongking which, at that time, formed part of the Chinese Empire.



## *Rome establishes Direct Intercourse with the East*

to the Roman frontier at Zeugma on the Euphrates, and so to Antioch.

Ptolemy has preserved for us an important record of his predecessor Marinus of Tyre, which describes the alternative route followed in the opposite direction by the agents of 'Maes the Macedonian, also called Titianus', from Bactra to the 'country of Seres'. It ran up the valley of the Oxus to the Alai; and Ptolemy's 'valley of the Komedor', through which the ascent towards Imaos led, is Kara-tegin, the valley of the Surkhab. Stein, whose authority is supreme in this question, considers that the celebrated 'Stone Tower' of Ptolemy is to be found in the vicinity of Daraut-Kurghan, 'where the Kara-tegin valley opens out towards the Alai'. He also considers that 'the station at Mount Imaos, whence traders start on their journey to Sera', corresponds to the present Irkeshtum.<sup>1</sup> I have twice visited Irkeshtum when travelling between Farghana and Kashgar, and was much struck by the fact that the two land routes met at this remote spot. It was undoubtedly the 'half-way house' on the road to China. Continuing eastwards, the Tarim River may undoubtedly be identified with the Oechardes, while the Auxacii are the Tien-shan, the Asmiraeci, the Kurruk-tagh, the Casii, the Kuenlun range, and finally the Thagurus represents the Nan-shan. The 'great nation of the Issedons' are shown in the Lop-nor region, thus, generally speaking, confirming the account given by Aristaeas.

In competition with these overland routes the Persian monopoly was, as mentioned above, avoided by a route which reached Palibothra (Patna) and followed down the Ganges to

<sup>1</sup> *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks*, pp. 292-5. *Vide also Sykes, Through Deserts and Oases of Central Asia*, p. 33.

## *The Quest for Cathay*

ports in the Bay of Bengal. Another route crossed the Hindu Kush and, traversing the Punjab, reached the Indian Ocean at Barygaza in the Gulf of Cambay, while a third route came out at Barbaricon farther north. It is interesting to note that Kanishka of the Kushan dynasty minted gold coins at Gandhara for use in this foreign trade.<sup>1</sup> Of other exports from China, we learn from Pliny that Seres supplies furs and iron, both of the highest value. Moreover, as Warmington points out, cinnamon had its origin in China, although it was generally believed to be the product of Arabia.<sup>2</sup> The exports from India and the islands of the East included pepper, the great preservative, nutmegs, cloves and other spices, perfumes, gums, especially the precious incense, pearls, rubies and diamonds, ivory and, above all, drugs of every kind. These constituted most attractive products that Europe bought with eagerness.

Roman exports to the East consisted mainly of base metals, woollen and linen textiles and glass, which last-named article was not manufactured in China until the fifth century A.D. Coral and amber, precious stones and the fragrant gum, storax, also figured among the exports.

Rome's trade with the East constituted a serious economic drain on Europe. Pliny calculated that the annual adverse balance was very great, and this statement is supported by the discovery of great hoards of Roman money in India. Indeed there is no doubt that, in the absence of mines, which could supply the deficiency, the Roman Empire suffered an economic

<sup>1</sup> *Vide Hudson's Europe and China*, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly 'astrakhan' is the product of the still-born lamb of a special breed of sheep at Bokhara; and 'Bokhara' carpets are woven by the Turkoman on the northern borders of Persia.



## *Rome establishes Direct Intercourse with the East*

decline from the trade with the East and that Pliny was justified in writing: 'The sea of Arabia . . . sends us pearls, and, at the lowest computation, India and the Seres and that Peninsula put together drain our empire of one hundred million sesterces [over £1,000,000] every year. That is the price that our luxuries and our womenkind cost us!' Speaking approximately, the imports into the Roman Empire compared with the exports as three to two, and, as Hudson puts it, 'the more primitive economy sucked the lifeblood of the more advanced'.

Let us now compare the experiences of the English merchant-adventurers in Elizabethan times with those of the Roman Empire. Sir William Foster<sup>1</sup> in his excellent work points out that cloth, lead and tin, the staple products of England, could never furnish the sum needed to purchase cargoes of calico and spices. Sir Thomas Roe, our first ambassador at the court of the Great Moghul, considered that a drain of bullion constituted a serious evil. After making enquiries, he arranged for an English ship with a mixed cargo of English and Indian products to visit Mokha, where the venture was a profitable one, and provided money for the purchase of the calico, etc., for England. However, the merchants of India were furious at the English trading in Indian commodities, and when the next fleet from England brought a quantity of Mediterranean coral, the Indian authorities absolutely refused to allow this trade to continue. Later it was revived, and similar trading in spices and other products, carried in English ships to various Eastern centres, was greatly developed. Actually the feeling against the export of bullion from England was unjustified,

<sup>1</sup> *England's Quest of Eastern Trade*, p. 288 et seq.



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since Indian and Chinese products thus purchased won profits in the markets of the world.

During the reign of Augustus, Strabo tells us that as many as one hundred and twenty ships were engaged in the Eastern trade, and, after the discovery of the monsoons, this number must have increased, but from the closing years of the second century A.D. this direct trade with the East declined and then ceased. It was intercepted by the Ethiopians and the Arabs; and although the Roman Empire revived under Diocletian and Justinian, their power was not sufficient to reopen the Red Sea to through trade. Indeed it was not until Vasco da Gama reached Calicut in 1498 that a direct sea route from Europe to the East was reopened, more than a thousand years after it had been closed.

CHAPTER IV

EXPLORATION IN ASIA DURING THE  
EARLY MIDDLE AGES

After accomplishing a journey of many days, Zemarchus and his party arrived in the territories of the Sogdians. . . . There certain Turks, announcing themselves as the conjurors away of evil omens, came up to Zemarchus and taking all the baggage of the party, set it down in the middle. They then began ringing a bell and beating a kind of a drum over the baggage, whilst some ran round it carrying leaves of burning incense flaming and crackling, and raged about like maniacs, gesticulating as if repelling evil spirits.

From the Fragments of MENANDER PROTECTOR

The Hindus and the Chinese and the Persians, and all the people of the Isles of the Sea, and they who dwell in Syria and Armenia, in Javan and Romania call Thomas to remembrance and adore Thy Name, O Thou our Redeemer.

From the Chaldaean Breviary of the Malabar Church



## CHAPTER IV

### EXPLORATION IN ASIA DURING THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

THE third century of our era marks the decline of the Roman Empire. Civil strife made it impossible to prevent the invasions of the virile barbarians; the coinage was repeatedly debased, partly owing to the drain of the Eastern trade; everywhere there was lack of confidence, a lack of capacity to deal with emergencies, a decline in production, in trade and in wealth. This decline was indeed arrested under Diocletian, Constantine and Justinian; but, as we shall see, the revival cannot compare in power and influence with the days of the greatness of the Roman Empire. Under Constantine, Christianity was established and the Middle Ages commenced. The Greek scientists were thrust aside and forgotten while, as mentioned in the introduction to this work, geography was based on the crude cosmogonies of the Old Testament. As a result darkness covered Europe for some six centuries.

As the imperial power waned, so did Rome's Oriental trade. The Ethiopian kingdom of Axum with its port Adulis, the modern Zeila, became a great centre of sea power and commerce, dominating not only its narrow waters but also the Himyarites of the opposite coast of Yemen. The kings of Axum thereby controlled the valuable Eastern trade which was carried in Arab vessels, and gained both wealth and power. Indeed, so strong was their position that when the Roman

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Empire revived in the fourth century, the Ethiopian kings retained their monopoly.

The foundation of Constantinople as the capital of the Roman Empire, in 330, changed the direction of trade routes, greatly to the disadvantage of Alexandria; and imports from the East, including silk, passed mainly through Persian territory by a new land route, running from Merv and Herat across northern Persia and Armenia, while spices reached Syria by the Persian Gulf. By these two routes passed the bulk of the Eastern trade, while Alexandria purchased from Ethiopian middlemen.

The age of Justinian was remarkable from many points of view. His famous general, Belisarius, defeated the armies of the Great King, with whom peace was concluded in 533. This peace permitted Justinian to reunite North Africa and Italy to the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the Code of Justinian and the building of Santa Sophia rank as among the great achievements of mankind. Justinian sent an ambassador to the King of Axum with a view to the Abyssinians obtaining silk from Ceylon for the Roman market, but the scheme failed. However, the need for silk and spices, to satisfy which Europe was being drained of its bullion, was brought to an end, so far as the silk was concerned, by the action of two Nestorian monks, who had lived in China and were acquainted with the culture of silk. Braving the death penalty, they smuggled 'seed' from Khotan concealed in the hollow of a bamboo staff, and brought it to Constantinople. Thus during the reign of Justinian, in the middle of the sixth century, was founded the silk industry in Europe.

Justinian, aware of its importance, made silk a State mono-



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poly which enriched Constantinople for many generations. Indeed the Byzantine Empire used her control of silk tissues in her negotiations with the barbarians much as China had done under the Han dynasty. Unable to confront them with steel, the later Byzantine emperors created a court of such magnificence, combined with such clever stage management, that the simple warriors who were admitted to an audience were overcome with the wonders of the palace and fell prostrate at the foot of the throne.

During the reign of Justinian Cosmas wrote a valuable account of his voyages, which he embodied in his *Christian Topography*. 'In this, our part of the earth,' he wrote, 'there are four gulfs which penetrate into it from the ocean as the pagans also say, and say with truth, when treating of this subject, namely, this gulf of ours, which entering from Gadeira [Cadiz] in the west extends along the countries subject to Rome; the Arabian Gulf, called the Erythrean, and the Persian, both of which advance from Zingium to the southern and more eastern parts of the earth from the country called Barbaria, which begins where the land of the Ethiopians terminates. . . . The fourth gulf is that which flows from the north-eastern part of the earth, and is called the Caspian or Hyrcanian Sea. These gulfs only admit of navigation, for the ocean cannot be navigated on account of the great number of its currents, and the dense fogs which it sends up, obscuring the rays of the sun, and because of the vastness of its extent. . . . I myself have made voyages for commercial purposes in three of these gulfs—the Roman, the Arabian and the Persian.'<sup>1</sup> In this delightful

<sup>1</sup> For Cosmas I have consulted *The Christian Topography*, by J. W. McCrindle (Hakluyt Society).



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description it is to be noted that the Mediterranean Sea is termed a 'gulf'. By Zingium Cosmas not only designates the Bab-el-Mandeb Straits but the adjacent sea coast and ocean indefinitely southwards, in which connexion Zanzibar signifies 'The Sea of Zingium'. It is interesting to note that Ethiopia not only vaguely included Abyssinia but also the frankincense country. Cosmas was, of course, mistaken in considering the Caspian Sea to be a gulf of Ocean. Herodotus knew better.

Cosmas describes Ethiopia in detail. He landed at Adulis in 525 and copied the celebrated Greek inscriptions,<sup>1</sup> of which he fortunately kept copies. He also visited Axum, where the king was 'preparing to start on an expedition against the Homerites on the opposite side of the Gulf'. He seems indeed to have travelled far and wide in Abyssinia.

There is no doubt that his voyages extended to the frankincense country, as his notes to the inscription prove that Barbaria is Somaliland. In his reference to the silk trade he mentions that it comes from a country lying to the left as the Indian sea is entered, but situated much further than the Persian Gulf or the island which the Indians called Selediba and the Greeks Taprobane (Ceylon). He adds: 'For just as great a distance as the Persian Gulf runs up into Persia, so great a distance and even a greater has one to run, who being bound for Tzinitza [China], sails eastward from Taprobane. Beyond Tzinitza there is neither navigation or any land to inhabit.' This, of course, was Ptolemy's opinion. Of Ceylon Cosmas writes: 'The island being, as it is, in a central position, is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and

<sup>1</sup> The inscriptions refer to the campaign of Ptolemy III, who invaded Syria and Persia in 245 B.C.

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Ethiopia, and it likewise sends out many of its own. And from the remotest countries, I mean Tzinista and other trading places, it receives silk, aloes, cloves, sandalwood and other products, and these again are passed on to marts on this side . . . to Persia, and the Homerite country, and to Adule.' Altogether the description of the countries visited by Cosmas during his travels, apart from its literary value, constitutes a work of remarkable merit.

We must now turn our attention to a political event of considerable geographical importance to the penetration of Central Asia. In the history of Iran under its great king, Noshirwan, we read of the coming of the Turks to the borders of Iran in the middle of the sixth century. The Eastern Turks owned the lands stretching from Mongolia to the Ural Mountains, while the Western Turks ruled from the Altai Mountains to the Sir Daria and westwards to the Volga. In 554 the Chief of the Western Turks entered into an alliance with Noshirwan, with the result that the Ephthalites, or White Huns, hostile neighbours of Persia, were crushed. Their territories were divided between the allies, so that Iran recovered Balkh, and the Oxus once again became her eastern boundary.

Later on, the Turks became enemies of Persia, since Noshirwan poisoned some of their ambassadors, and, acting on the advice of a certain Maniakh of Sogdiana, Dizabul, the *Khákan* of the Turks, decided in 568 to despatch an embassy to Constantinople and arrange for the Silk Route to be diverted to the north of the Persian Empire. The Turkish embassy, headed by Maniakh, duly reached the Black Sea at the Sea of Azov, probably travelling along much the same route as that followed by the Greek Aristetas more than one thousand years before. Justin II wel-



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comed the ambassadors, and a return mission under Zemarchus the Cilician was sent to the camp of the *Khákan*, which was probably situated in a valley of the Ala-ta. It was in this neighbourhood that Hsuan-tsang, the celebrated Chinese explorer, met his successor in 630.

Dizabul received the ambassadors in his tent, 'seated on a golden chair with two wheels, which could be drawn by a horse when required'.<sup>1</sup> The camp was full of valuable objects, the rich silk tissues being especially admired by Zemarchus and his staff, while feasts lasting the entire day figured largely on the programme. Zemarchus, who had been honoured with the gift of a fair handmaiden, accompanied Dizabul to Talas, not far from the Sir Daria, where the *Khákan* received an ambassador from Iran. At the feast which followed the Roman envoys occupied the more honourable seats, and the *Khákan* loaded the Iranian with abuse, to which he replied in the most spirited manner. The party broke up, Dizabul telling the courageous ambassador that he was marching to invade Iran.

The Roman ambassadors were then dismissed with many declarations of friendship and, accompanied by a Turkish embassy, started on the return journey. Crossing the Oech, presumably the Sir Daria, they struck the Sea of Aral. Here Zemarchus despatched 'George, whose business it was to carry expresses . . . by a route which was altogether desert but was the shortest way'. The ambassadors then travelled for twelve days 'along the sandy shores of the lagoon, and crossing the Daich [Ural] and the Attila [Volga], they just escaped an ambush of 4000 Persians to the north of the Caucasus, and

<sup>1</sup> *Cathay and the Way Thither*, vol. i, pp. 205-12.



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finally reached Byzantium by the roundabout way of Trebizond'.

This mission marks an event of considerable geographical importance in the penetration of Central Asia from the West. Although these good relations between Byzantium and the Turks did not last long, the diplomatic contact between the two powers enables us to gather an interesting if vague description of the part of Central Asia that was visited. Actually, as the silk industry became firmly established at Constantinople the imports from China gradually lessened and the romance of the Silk Route was ended.

Owing to this contact between Byzantium and the Turks, Theophylactus Simocatta, an Egyptian Greek, writing about 630, is able to give a valuable if somewhat inaccurate description of China under the name of Taugas—the Tamghaj of Arab and Persian writers—with its capital Khubdan, the modern Si-ngan fu in Shensi. He stated that its ruler was termed the Son of God, that the nation practised idolatry, but that their laws were just and their life full of temperate wisdom. He described the territory of the Taugas as divided into two by a river, presumably the Yangtse, and noted that while Maurice ruled the Roman Empire, the men of the south side crossed the river and, defeating the men on the north side, became supreme. Here we have an account of the struggle between the Sui and Ch'en dynasties which ended in the unification of China under the Sui dynasty in 588.

Simocatta was merely a recorder of tales and, so far as European travellers or writers are concerned, the Dark Ages had set in, and for six centuries there is no more connexion with, or knowledge of, China. The Silk Route had been broken,

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while the conquests of the Caliphate cut off Europe not only from Central Asia and China but also from India.

Europe had entered the Dark Ages, but this was not the case with China:

The seer from the West was then in the shade;  
The seer from the East was then in the light.

In the annals of the virile Tang dynasty a remarkably accurate account is given of the number of cities and populated centres contiguous to one another and of the amazing wealth of Byzantium, now termed Fu lin, from Πόλις, 'the city'. Of greater historical importance is the following: 'The Ta-shi [Arabs] having overrun kingdom after kingdom, at last sent their General-in-Chief, Moi, to lay siege to Fulin. . . . The negotiators of the peace that followed made it one of the conditions that the Ta-shi should every year pay tribute.' We know from other sources that the Caliph Muavia (Moi), after having failed to capture Constantinople for seven successive summers (671 to 678), finally sued for peace. This was concluded on the terms of an annual payment by him of 3000 pieces of gold, fifty slaves and fifty horses. Here then we have, so far as I know, the first mention in Chinese annals of a great historical event in Europe.

By way of conclusion to this chapter I propose to give some account of the first Christian missionaries who penetrated into Asia. Christianity spread eastwards very early, and there is a legend that the Arab *Shaykh* of Osroene wrote to Christ offering Him protection, and that St. Adai (Thaddaeus) converted the inhabitants of Iraq.

The traditions of the eastern churches insist that St. Thomas preached not only in India but also in China with much success



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if the author quoted as a motto to this chapter be accepted, but this is a disputed tradition. Apart from these legends and traditions, a Christian writer of the third century refers to the Seres, the Persians and the Medes as having been reached by the power of the Word.<sup>1</sup> We reach firmer ground in the fact that Bishop John 'of Persia and Great India' attended the Nicene Council in 325.

Upon Christianity being made the official religion of the Roman Empire, Constantine tactlessly assumed the rôle of patron of the Christians in Persia. His letter to Shapur ran: 'You can imagine how delighted I am to hear that Persia . . . is adorned by the Christians, on whose behalf I write to you'.<sup>2</sup> Shapur naturally resented this attitude and, realising the lack of loyalty displayed by his Christian subjects, who looked to the Roman Emperor rather than to himself, viewed them with marked disfavour. Indeed the situation was similar to that of the unfortunate Armenians, who were massacred at the end of the nineteenth century partly because they looked to Europe for protection. Already an organised Church under a Catholicus, the Christians in Persia were ordered to pay double taxes as their contribution to the war instead of personal service. *Mar*<sup>3</sup> Shimun, the Catholicus, refused to collect the money and, in 339, *Mar* Shimun, five bishops and one hundred priests were executed at Susa. This persecution lasted for some forty years, monks and nuns especially being subject to pitiless severity because they violated the sane principles of Zoroastrianism to be fruitful and multiply.

<sup>1</sup> Vide *Cathay*, etc., i, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Sykes, *History of Persia* (3rd ed.), i, 412.

<sup>3</sup> *Mar* signifies 'Lord'. The present Patriarch of the Assyrian Church is also *Mar* Shimun, or 'Lord Simon'.



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The Christian community gradually recovered after the death of Shapur. Under Yezdigird I relations with Byzantium were good and, upon Marutha, a bishop, curing the Great King of a malady, a *farman* was issued in 409 permitting Christians to worship openly and to rebuild their churches. This decree was as important to the Eastern Church as the famous Edict of Milan was to the Church of the West. In 410 the position of Persia as a Church united under its own Catholicus, and recognised as such by the Shah, was definitely settled at the Council of Seleucia.

The disputes between different Churches of Europe lie outside the scope of this work. It suffices to note that the Persian Church, desiring to be separate from that of Byzantium, adopted the doctrine of two natures advocated by Nestorius. His followers, expelled from the Roman Empire, took refuge in Persia, and their influence led to the Persian Church becoming definitely Nestorian towards the end of the fifth century. It adopted the title of the Church of the East, and its missionaries penetrated deeply into Central Asia and China.

At the period of the Council of Seleucia bishops of Fars, of Bahrain, Hulwan and Hamadan, Rei and Nishapur are mentioned. In 424 bishops of Rei, Nishapur, Merv and Herat attended a council. In 498 there were Christian communities among the Ephthalite Huns on the River Oxus, for whom a bishop was consecrated in 549. Finally there was a Nestorian community in China in 636.<sup>1</sup> In 742 we hear of a mission 'composed of priests of great virtue' visiting China. Moreover, the Metropolitans of China, Persia, Merv, Syria, Arabia, Herat and Samarcand are mentioned in the ninth century as excused from

<sup>1</sup> L. E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia*, 1933.

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attending the quadrennial synods, owing to the remoteness of their sees.

The most important record of Christianity in China is the inscription on the celebrated monument of Singan Fu, the capital referred to above. It gives an abstract of Christian doctrine and an account of the arrival of the 'Priest Olopun from the empire of Ta-tsin in the year 635, directed by the blue clouds, observing the signs of the winds, and traversing perilous countries'. Later there follows a decree of the Emperor T'ai-tsung issued in favour of the new doctrine in 638. In 745 the Emperor Hiuan-tsung, of the Tang dynasty, issued an edict to the effect that the religion of the sacred books known as Persian had originally come from Ta-tsin; that, propagated by preaching and tradition, it had reached the Middle Kingdom, and had long been practised therein. Temples of this religion had been erected from the first, and were known popularly as Persian temples. But since this title was inaccurate, the edict enacted that, throughout the empire, the Persian temples should thenceforward be known as Ta-tsin temples.

In 845, however, the Emperor of China was hostile to Christianity. He issued an edict by which Christian monks were ordered to return to secular life and to cease to pervert the institutions of the country. Christianity had remained a foreign Church, depending on imperial favour, as expressed in one passage from the monument which ran: 'His gracious favour was like the southern Mountain's towering peak; his overflowing kindness was as deep as the Eastern Sea'.<sup>1</sup> This edict constituted a crushing blow to Christianity in China, where it almost disappeared. But it continued to exist throughout

<sup>1</sup> A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before the year 1550*, p. 39.



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Central Asia and among the Mongols, as Carpini, Rubruquis and Marco Polo testify. Indeed, after the Mongol conquest of China, Christian communities were noted by Marco Polo in many cities of that empire, but the four Metropolitan sees had disappeared.



CHAPTER V

THE CALIPHATE AND THE CRUSADES

Such was the love of truth of St. Louis that he would not even lie to the Saracens.

THE SIEUR DE JOINVILLE

Le commerce du Levant prit, pendant les croisades, un essor qu'il n'eût guère été possible de rêver peu de temps auparavant, même avec l'imagination la plus hardie.

W. HEYD, *Le Commerce du Levant au Moyen Âge*

## CHAPTER V

### THE CALIPHATE AND THE CRUSADES

**D**URING the Middle Ages four events appear to stand out above all others. Firstly, we have the rise of Islam early in the seventh century. The second great event began with pilgrimages to the Holy Land, to be followed by armed pilgrims or Crusaders who founded the short-lived Latin Kingdom. Yet for Europe the Crusaders represent an episode of the greatest importance. Thirdly, the Mongol conquest of Central Asia and Russia, and, finally, the quest for Cathay. In this chapter we deal especially with the Caliphate and the Crusades.

Muhammad, the Prophet of the Arabs, set in motion a great wave of conquest. The Persian Empire was overthrown, the Byzantine Empire was robbed of its richest provinces and, under his successors, known as the Caliphs, an empire was created greater than that ruled by Darius or Alexander the Great, which stretched from the borders of China and the Indus to Morocco. By the conquest of Spain and the invasion of France the Moslems threatened Western Europe until, in 732, they were defeated by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours. Had the issue gone against the Christians, the considered opinion of Gibbon ran: 'Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet'. Possibly Gibbon exaggerated in this statement, but of the ascendancy of Islam over Christianity at this period there is no question.



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To turn to the question of Moslem sea power, it is interesting to note that the immediate successors of Muhammad left to the sea its mysteries. Amru, the conqueror of Egypt, reported to the Caliph Omar that the sea 'was a great pool, which some foolhardy people furrow, resembling ants on logs of wood'. Accordingly Omar forbade all naval activities. Muavia, however, when acting as Governor of Syria, founded the Moslem navy, utilising the services of Syrian and Egyptian sailors. So successful was he that, in 655, the Arabs defeated the Byzantine fleet in the Battle of the Masts, but, as mentioned in the previous chapter, they failed to capture Constantinople.

European writers are apt to think of the Caliphate as a purely Oriental state, but, in view of the fact that it stretched along the Mediterranean Sea and also included Spain, it is evident that this great empire was a Mediterranean power. Again, the Arabs were the heirs of the Hellenistic culture, which the conquests of Alexander the Great and the administrators of the Seleucid dynasty and of the Roman Empire had so widely diffused in Asia. Finally, the translations of the Greek philosophers and of Ptolemy into Arabic by members of the Nestorian Church and other scholars in Syria, enabled benighted Europe, by means of retranslation in the Middle Ages, to regain contact with the Greek masterpieces, mainly at the Moslem universities of Spain.

It is profitable, I think, to estimate the Arabic share in the earlier advance in geographical knowledge, based as it was on Greek sources. Fulfilling, with much zeal, the precept of Muhammad to 'seek knowledge even in China', the Abbasid Caliphate under Mamun established a golden age of intellectual activity in the first quarter of the ninth century. The arts, literature, science, the practice of medicine were all seriously studied,

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while Mamun founded a true school of geographical science with observatories at Baghdad and Damascus, where attempts were made to determine the obliquity of the ecliptic.

Moslem explorers had penetrated to China as early as the seventh century, and to this period we owe the remarkable accounts of Abu Zeyd Hassan of Sira and Sulayman, the merchant who voyaged from Siraf in the Persian Gulf along a well-known trade route to the Yellow Sea and Khan Fu—the Kinsai of Marco Polo. From them we learn much about the government, religion and customs of the Chinese. We also hear about tea: 'a certain herb, which they drink with hot water. . . . It grows on a shrub more bushy than a pomegranate and of a more taking smell, but with a kind of bitterness.'

Among the greatest of the Arab geographers was Masudi, who in the middle of the tenth century travelled over the known world from Spain to Turkestan and China, while he penetrated southwards along the east coast of Africa to Zanzibar and Sofala, which, situated 'at the extremity of the country of Zanj', he was the first explorer to visit and describe. To conclude this brief digression, Islam restored to Christendom the wisdom of the Greeks, but by sitting astride the arteries of commerce up the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, she was able to tax the products of the East as she wished. Indeed, she bled Europe white by the customs, dues which she levied on the spices of India, until the Portuguese opened up direct trade with the East and cut these arteries of commerce. Then, and not till then, was Europe able to recover from the fear which Islam had inspired for so many centuries.

To turn to Central Asia under Muavia, whose repulse before



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Constantinople did not materially hinder his campaigns in the East, the Oxus was crossed, and both Bokhara and Samarcand fell to the Moslems, who held Asia up to the Sir Daria on the north and to the Indus on the south. In short, in Asia, they became the successors of Alexander the Great. Under Welid (705-14), the Moslem armies penetrated still farther east and crossed the Tien-shan to Kashgar. A curious story of this campaign has come down to us, according to which the Arab leader swore to take possession of the soil of China. To avert further hostilities a diplomatic formula was arranged by which the Chinese Governor sent him a load of earth to trample on, a bag of Chinese money to symbolise tribute, and four youths on whom he imprinted his seal.

Two years later the Arabs, in alliance with the Tibetans, taking advantage of the rebellion of the Western Turks, again penetrated into Chinese Turkestan. This was the most easterly point reached by the Arab armies and affords a proof of their marvellous initiative. During this period an Arab ambassador reached the Chinese court. He refused to perform the kow-tow, declaring that a Moslem bowed only to Allah. At first it was decided to execute the bold Arab, but a minister represented to the Emperor that a difference in court etiquette did not constitute a crime, and the Emperor thereupon decided to excuse the formality.

In the third century of its existence, the Caliphate gradually became weak and broke up into a number of relatively small states, albeit their rulers were, generally speaking, anxious for recognition by the Caliph. The advent of a new power, the Seljuk Turks, created an epoch. They swept away these insignificant dynasties and, once again, united Islam under a



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single sway from Chinese Turkestan to the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the Seljuks, with the fervour of recent converts, revitalised Islam just as the erstwhile pagan Norsemen revitalised Christendom; and when Europe, under Norman leaders, invaded Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt as Crusaders, the recent converts on both sides constituted the steel tips of their lances.

The Seljuks were by origin a branch of the Ghuzz Turks. Their founder, Tukak, the father of Seljuk, moved his tribe westwards into Transoxiana, where he and his followers became fervent Moslems. Sultan Mahmud, the 'Idol-breaker', alarmed at the rising strength of the tribe, hoped to weaken it by settling it in new grazing-grounds on the borders of Khorasan, but failed to do so. In the middle of the eleventh century, Masud, son of the 'Idol-breaker', was driven out of Khorasan by the Seljuks, whose chief, Toghril Beg, after conquering Iran, paid a state visit to Baghdad. There, after falling on his face and kissing the ground, he was appointed Vice-regent of the Successor of the Prophet. Toghril led his victorious armies westwards until, in Georgia and Iberia, he came into contact with the forces of Byzantium. His successor, Alp Arslan, continued the Seljuk conquests. In 1071 he defeated a superior Byzantine army at Manzikart, a battle which constituted a serious disaster for that empire. Under Malik Shah, guided by his celebrated Vizier Nizam-ut Mulk, the Seljuk Empire conquered the greater part of Syria and Egypt and reached its climax.

The Seljuks occupied most of the Byzantine provinces in Asia Minor, which were formed into a separate state. Its ruler, a member of the ruling dynasty, made Nicaea his capital. This branch of the Seljuks, with whom the Crusaders waged war,

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was known as the Seljuks of Rum.<sup>1</sup> The Moslem conquests, alike by the Caliphs or the Seljuks, created a barrier between Europe and China, which was not broken until the Mongols conquered Asia from the Pacific Ocean to Eastern Europe.

The second of these great events began with pilgrimages to the Holy Land. At first Bethlehem, the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem were specially visited. A great stimulus was given to these pilgrimages by Helena, the mother of Constantine, who, in the fourth century, built a chapel on the site of the Holy Sepulchre, and was also credited with the discovery of the 'True Cross'.

A typical pilgrimage was that of Antoninus of Placentia, who travelled in 570, not long before the rise of Islam. He wrote a 'Perambulation' which Beazley characterises as 'extensive, curious and suggestive'. Travelling to Constantinople by land, Antoninus continued his pilgrimage by sea to Cyprus and Syria. Visiting Biblus, Beyrout, Acre and Mount Carmel, he reached Cana of Galilee, where he claims to have rested 'on the very same couch as did Our Lord at the famous wedding feast'. At Nazareth he was shown the book from which Christ learnt His letters; and he notes that the hatred of the Jews to the Pilgrims was evinced by burning their footsteps with straw.

Accuracy was not a characteristic of Antoninus, who states that in the 'Salt Sea', as he terms it, 'no stick or straw can float, and no man can swim'. As to Lot's wife and her salt pillar, he affirms that the report was false, 'that she is diminished in size by the licking of animals'. So much for the marvels Antoninus relates. He also travelled far and wide outside Palestine, visiting

<sup>1</sup> Rum is a form of Rome. The Emperor of the Byzantine Empire was known in Asia as the Kaiser-i-Rum.





PILGRIMS LANDING IN PALESTINE (above)

Paying toll outside the city gate (below)

From *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Flemish miniature,  
early 15th century. British Museum





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Mount Sinai by way of the Gulf of Akaba, where he noted ships from India laden with spices. After completing this journey, he penetrated as far as the Cataracts of the Nile. Returning once again to Palestine, he visited Greater Antioch and crossed the Euphrates. Here Antoninus ends the record of his remarkable pilgrimage.

The earliest of our countrymen to undertake a pilgrimage to Palestine was St. Willibald, the West Saxon. Sailing from Hamble Mouth in Southampton Water, he and his companions duly reached Rome. In the spring of 722 they decided 'to reach and gaze upon the walls of that delectable and desirable city of Jerusalem', but upon landing in Syria and travelling to Emessa, they were imprisoned 'as strangers and unknown men'. Brought before the Caliph Yezid II, he asked them from what country they had come. They replied, 'From the western shore where the sun sets, and we know not of any land beyond—nothing but water'. The Caliph thereupon ordered their release and they proceeded to Jerusalem. St. Willibald certainly deserves a niche in the Temple of Fame as being probably the first of our race to land in Asia. The caliph Harun-al-Rashid exchanged embassies with Charlemagne to whom he sent the keys of the Holy Sepulchre, while he built a hostel at Jerusalem for the benefit of the pilgrims, whose number increased as the years passed.

Suddenly, in 1010, Hakim, the Fatimid ruler of Egypt and Syria, destroyed the buildings of the Holy Sepulchre. Christendom was deeply stirred and the anti-Moslem movement began. It took shape in 1095 when Pope Urban II delivered a memorable sermon at Clermont, telling his hearers of the appeals he had received from Constantinople, where it would take two

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months to traverse the lands which had been wrested from the Empire of the East. The effect was instantaneous and cries of *Deus le volt! Deus le volt!* went up from the mighty host which prepared for war against the Saracens. Thus were initiated the Crusades, the most romantic episode of the Middle Ages.

The various contingents of the First Crusade under Duke Robert of Normandy and Raymond of Toulouse united at Constantinople and, defeating the Seljuks in two fiercely contested battles, fought their way across Asia Minor, took Antioch and finally stormed Jerusalem in 1099. The Latin Kingdom, consisting of four small princedoms, was then founded without much opposition, since at this period the Seljuks were in the throes of civil war.

In the middle of the following century the weakness of Egypt encouraged attack by the Crusaders, with the result that Nur-u-Din, Sultan of Aleppo and Damascus, was called in to help and finally ruled both countries. In the middle of the thirteenth century, Louis IX undertook his unfortunate crusade which, after the capture of Damietta, ended in the destruction of the French army and the capture of St. Louis, as he is termed.

Salar-u-Din, or Saladin, the able successor of Nur-u-Din, thanks to his military genius and to the immense wealth furnished by the spice trade, was more than a match for Richard Cœur-de-Lion, who, as '*Malik Ric*', created a splendid reputation for valour and prowess in the Near East. Prince Edward of England, afterwards Edward I, was one of the last Crusaders to bring an important force to Syria in 1271 and, a few years later, the Latin Kingdom fell.

In spite of ultimate failure, the results of the Crusades were beneficial. Apart from the growth of sea power, in which



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Europe finally won salvation, the fact that hundreds of thousands of pilgrims were brought into contact with new countries and races and visited unknown lands must have constituted an amazing education for Europe. Marriages, too, were not uncommon. Both Baldwin I and II wedded Armenian ladies; Baldwin III married a Greek princess, and the Emperor Manuel wedded Mary of Antioch, a Crusader's daughter. Moreover, owing to the need for financing the crusaders and pilgrims, a system of banking was organised with its chief centre in Europe at Paris. Henry II of England, for example, paid in money at this bank and took bills of exchange. Again, as the motto to this chapter proves, trade flourished as never before in Europe, the Italian maritime cities carrying pilgrims or Crusaders and furnishing supplies to Palestine, returned with cargoes of Eastern luxuries. New manufactures, muslin from Mosul, damask from Damascus, silk and cotton, new foods such as sugar and spices, mark the period, as do new fruits such as lemons, apricots and melons. Europe also owes to the East, Arabic numerals and the windmill. Venice owes to Tyre her beautiful glass, while she also learned the art of bookbinding in the East. Moreover, heraldry came to Europe from Syria and Egypt. We have the Persian word *gul* in *gule*, and the Arabic *kafiyah*, worn over the helmet to ward off the heat of the sun, has become the heraldic *lambrequin*. Again, our language has been enriched by 'Admiral' from *Amir-al-Bahr*, the 'Amir of the Sea', cotton, sofa, tariff, arsenal, magazine and many other words. Nor must we omit to mention that Europe learned much from the Oriental doctors of medicine, who were far in advance of European practitioners. The influence of the East on European art was also very great.

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Finally, among other branches of science the progress of geography during the Crusading era was important. Roger Bacon made a distinct advance, working on new lines of enquiry, and his writings had a considerable influence on the progress of exploration. The quotation in the Introduction from *Imago Mundi* as to the probable proximity of Spain to India was actually a quotation from the famous *Opus Majus*<sup>1</sup> of Bacon. Curiously enough this passage was cited by Columbus in a letter which he wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1498 as being one of the authorities which had first encouraged him to conceive his great voyage. As we shall see, the Mongol invasions and the Crusades also resulted in the exploration of Central Asia by heroic monks.

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i, p. 290, with introduction by J. H. Bridges.

CHAPTER VI

THE MONGOLS INVADE EUROPE



They came, they uprooted, they burned,  
They slew, they carried off, they departed.

*Tarikh-i-Jahan-Gusha*

In this year (1240) a detestable nation of Satan, to wit the countless army of the Tartars, broke loose from its mountain-environed home, and, piercing the solid rocks (of the Caucasus), poured forth like devils. . . . They are thirsting for and drinking blood, tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and men, dressed in ox-hides, armed with plates of iron, thickset, strong, invincible.

MATTHEW PARIS, *Chronica Majora*

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MONGOLS INVADE EUROPE

IN the first chapter of this work we have seen how the nomad tribes of Central Asia were constantly attacking China and one another. As the Chinese saying runs: 'If the Chinese are settled Tartars, the Tartars are nomad Chinese', and, from that point of view, the history of China has consisted of the double task of repelling the virile nomads with varying success or failure and of assimilating them when they conquered her fertile lands. In 936 a leading nomad tribe, the Khitans—whence the name Cathay—founded a dynasty known as the Liao, rulers of Liao-tung. But a branch of the same Tungusian tribe, to which the Khitan belonged, broke away and set up the Kin or 'Golden' dynasty.

The Mongols were one of several nomad tribes which ranged the steppes to the north of cultivated China. They were also known as Tatar. But owing to the similarity of this word to Tartarus, to which place they were emphatically consigned by Frederic II in his letter to Henry III, who wrote *Ad sua Tartara Tartari detrudentur*, and by the Pope, they were generally known as Tartars to Europeans. These nomads were divided by the Chinese into three classes, known respectively as the White, Black and Wild Tartars, according to their nearness to, or remoteness from, civilised China.

Yissugay,<sup>1</sup> the father of Temuchin, destined to be famous as Chengiz Khan, was a noted leader of raids, and when

<sup>1</sup> Sykes, *History of Persia*, vol. ii, chs. lvi, lvii.

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Temuchin was a boy the Buyr-Nur Tartars were incited by the Kin dynasty to attack his tribe. This they readily agreed to do, and killed Yissugay. The Buyr-Nur Tartars, elated with their victory, invaded China, and the Kin Emperor induced the powerful tribe of the Keraites, who were Nestorian Christians, to attack them. Toghril, chief of the Keraites, generally known as Wang Khan,<sup>1</sup> was possibly the historical personage around whom were woven the legends relating to the famous Prester John, ruler of a great empire in the remote East, which loomed so large in the eyes of medieval Europeans, and so calls for a digression.

In the Chronicle of Otto von Freisinger, written about 1158, we read that, some years before the capture of Edessa by the Moslems in 1144, a certain 'Johannes Presbyter' had won a great victory over the Medes and Persians. This event is now known to have been the defeat of the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar in 1141 by Yelui Tashi, the Buddhist chief of the Kara Khitai, who had founded an empire in what is now known as Chinese Turkestan and had assumed the title of Gur Khan,<sup>2</sup> or 'Universal Lord', which may have been mistaken for Johannes. This report was supported about 1165 by the celebrated forged letter, which represented this potentate as ruling over the three Indias, with seventy kings as his tributaries. 'In my palace', he writes, 'the windows are of crystal. The tables on which our courtiers eat are of gold and some of amethyst. . . . The chamber in which our sublimity reposes is marvellously decorated with

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent account of Prester John *vide* article by Sir Denison Ross in *Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages*. Wang or Ong and Khan alike signify 'Chief'.

<sup>2</sup> *History of Persia*, vol. ii, pp. 49 and 74.



擺里荒國



古今圖書集成

方輿彙編邊裔典第一百三十九卷北方未詳諸國部彙考一之二

A NOMAD OF THE TIME OF CHENGIZ KHAN  
From the Chinese encyclopaedia *T'u shueh di'eng*, 1726



## *The Mongols invade Europe*

gold and stones of every kind. At our table, thirty thousand men, besides occasional visitors, are daily entertained.'

This letter was addressed to Manuel I, Emperor of Byzantium, who in turn forwarded it to Frederick Barbarossa. Its author was suspected to be Christian, Archbishop of Mainz, but the most extraordinary thing is that the letter was, generally speaking, believed to be genuine, confirming as it did earlier vague reports. Thus when Carpini and Rubruquis travelled across Central Asia to Mongolia they hoped to discover Prester John in Tartary. The former traveller makes no direct reference to him: Rubruquis, on the other hand, gives a confused account of the question which is hardly worth quoting. As the chief of a Nestorian tribe of no particular importance hardly fulfilled the magnificence attributed to Prester John, rumours of a mighty Christian monarch ruling in Ethiopia led to the identification of the King of Abyssinia with Prester John. So important a part did this remote potentate play that Prince Henry the Navigator's original design was to outflank the Moors by sea, to join forces with Prester John and thus crush the Moslems. To conclude this digression, we shall see that Marco Polo firmly believed in the ruler of the Keraites being Prester John.

To resume the thread of our story, Toghril, some years later, was driven out by his brother, supported by the Naimans, who were also a Christian tribe. Later, Temuchin, who as an orphan boy had suffered many reverses of fortune, defeated the Keraites and made them his subjects. He also crushed the Naimans and killed their king. Ultimately, after many dramatic changes of fortune, he created a powerful confederacy of tribes and assumed the title of Chengiz Khan, or



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'Universal Lord'. One of his descendants told me that the conqueror once climbed a peak in the Altai range and mused whether he should continue his campaigns into the heart of China or march west. His chief adviser informed him that the grazing was best to the west, and thereupon the Mongol torrent swept towards Europe.

In 1219 Chengiz Khan invaded Central Asia and defeated its ruler, Ala-u-Din Muhammad of Khwarizm. Accepting this overthrow as final, the cowardly monarch resigned the initiative to the invaders, who thereupon, aided by their siege-train of balistas, catapults and machines for spraying Greek fire, under Chinese experts, captured city after city. To give an example of Mongol methods, Bokhara surrendered and Chengiz rode into the great mosque. The city was sacked and burned and its unfortunate inhabitants were divided up among the Mongols, who utilised the men as screens to storming parties, for digging approaches, for the erection of the siege-train, and, if necessary, for filling up the ditch of a city with fascines, supplemented by their own bodies. The women became their slaves.

In pursuit of craven Ala-u-Din Muhammad, the Mongols overran Northern Persia and sacked Rei. Continuing westwards they defeated the Georgians in 1221, and, skirting the westward shore of the Caspian, they inflicted a crushing defeat on a Russian army, which was drawn up on the Dnieper. To celebrate their victory in a befitting manner they placed their victims under heavy planks and, sitting on them, they feasted, exulting in their dying groans! The invaders then returned to Central Asia, passing to the north of the Caspian.

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Chengiz Khan died in 1227, but his successor, Ogotay, simultaneously with campaigns in China and Korea, despatched fresh expeditions against Iran and Europe. Iran was again raided, with terrible massacres, as was Georgia and Armenia, the Mongols reaching the Black Sea. Batu, marching to the north of the Caspian, led a hundred and fifty thousand Mongols against Europe. Conquering the greater part of Russia, he divided his force. The northern army defeated the Poles at Szydlow, and then almost annihilated a German army, which included the Knights of the Templars and Hospitallers, at Liegnitz in 1241. Batu, with the southern army, annihilated the Hungarians, took Pesth and reached the Adriatic. Later, in 1259, the Mongols again raided Poland. Hudson<sup>1</sup> points out that the Mongol operations on the west were always subsidiary to those against China, which was the richest country in the world, situated close to the homeland of the Mongols, and always formed the main objective.

The state of Europe at this period is well summed up by Heyd: 'En Occident, la chrétienté, fatiguée des croisades, divisée en deux partis acharnés l'un contre l'autre par la querelle de la papauté et de l'empire, ne songeait à rien moins qu'à se lever en masse pour lutter contre l'ennemi commun'.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately the Mongols were content to rivet their yoke on Russia, but made no attempt to hold European countries further west. Probably the task was beyond their power owing to the immense distances, or the difficult country was not favourable to mounted troops.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* pp. 138-40.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Commerce du Levant au Moyen Âge*, vol. ii, p. 64.



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It is a question of some interest to discuss the amazing success of the Mongols against every European army they encountered. It was undoubtedly the age of the horse, of which the Mongols possessed an almost unlimited number which were highly trained, enduring and hardy; indeed they were able to dig through the snow for their fodder. This factor gave them extraordinary mobility. Again, at three years of age the Mongol child was given a bow of suitable size, and as his strength increased so did the size of his bow, until, upon reaching early manhood, the full-sized bow, the most formidable in existence, was given to him. Thus was formed a body of mounted archers of unequalled skill, accustomed to fighting, permeated with the traditions of Chengiz (who must have been a veritable god of war), as inherited by Batu and other experienced chiefs. They were accompanied by their extremely hardy wives, who equally led the lives that they were accustomed to. Their numbers were probably exaggerated, but were obviously great in view of the lure of the rich plunder they collected and the rich grazing-lands they occupied. Losses were therefore rapidly made good, not only by reinforcements from Mongolia but from local contingents. On the other hand, the armies of Europe were mainly hastily raised levies, lacking discipline, cohesion and leadership and utterly unprepared to face these deadly mobile archers. Consequently it is not surprising to find that only the regular army of the Mamelukes could defeat the Mongols.

To resume, the death of Ogotay was followed by an interregnum of several years during which period his widow ruled as Regent for her eldest son, Kuyuk, who was serving under his cousin, Batu, in Hungary. Kuyuk was duly elected *Khákan* in





THE SULTAN OGOTAY RECEIVES AMBASSADORS

From a manuscript of *Jamī' al-Tawārikh*, circa A.D. 1315

Martin: *Miniature Painting and Painters*. Bernard Quaritch, Ltd.



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1246, but died in 1248. His successor was Mangu of the Tuluy branch, who was elected *Khákan* in 1251.<sup>1</sup>

The first authentic information regarding the Mongols, which was embodied in the work of Matthew Paris, was brought by a mission despatched by the Grand Master of the Ismailis to the kings of France and England in 1238. Their object was to negotiate an alliance against the Mongols, but when their envoy presented his proposal to Henry III the Bishop of Winchester exclaimed: 'Let these dogs devour each other . . . and then we shall see the universal Catholic Church founded on their ruins'.

The Ismailis, who will appear again in this work, were the followers of Ismail, a disinherited son of the sixth *Imam*, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. In 1090 a certain Hasan Sabbah organised a powerful propaganda in favour of the sect, as it had become, and seized the fortress of Alamut in the Elburz. He then set to work to train a body of *fidai*, or devotees, and with this purpose in view he laid out a garden which represented Muhammad's Paradise, 'running with conduits of wine and milk and honey and water, and full of lovely women for the delectation of its inmates', as Marco Polo describes it. Using this as a lure, the 'Old Man of the Mountain', as he was termed, drugged his devotees—whence their names of 'Hashish Eaters' or 'Assassins'—and had them conveyed to this garden to enjoy its delights and then drugged them again and brought them out of it. By this means he created a band of *fidai* among the simple villagers, who, believing that they had been in Paradise, were ready to carry out orders to kill whomsoever the

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Lane-Poole, *Mohammadan Dynasties*, gives the various divisions of the Mongols.



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Grand Master desired, relying implicitly on his power to send them back to Paradise. He founded branches of the sect in Eastern Persia, in Syria and elsewhere. The attempt on Prince Edward of England at Acre in 1272 by a *fidai* of the Syrian branch brings the sect into touch with English history.

In 1251 Hulaku Khan was despatched by Mangu with a powerful army to extirpate the Ismailis and also the Caliphate. In 1256, beginning with Tun and Kain in Eastern Persia, he captured the Ismaili strongholds in detail. They possessed no field army and their *fidai* were unable to assassinate Hulaku, who was entirely surrounded by his Mongols. Finally, the Grand Master, a boy of nine, surrendered Alamut without offering any resistance. It is interesting to note that H.H. the Aga Khan is the present head of the Ismailis.<sup>1</sup> I have met his followers, who pay him tithes, at Kerman, in Khorasan, and in Chinese Turkestan.

After accomplishing the destruction of the Assassins, Hulaku, not without much hesitation and consultation of astrologers—for he feared the Caliphate—marched on Baghdad. The caliph, Mustasim Billah, refused to unlock the doors of his treasure-house to pay and equip an adequate force, and no serious resistance was offered. Baghdad fell in 1258 and was sacked, while its inhabitants were massacred by thousands. Thanks, however, to the influence of Dokuz *Khatun*, the wife of Hulaku and a member of the Christian tribe of the Keraites, the Christians were spared.

The cowardly caliph was executed in Mongol fashion. Royal blood could not be shed: so he was tied up in a sack and horses

<sup>1</sup> Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, pp. 68-70; also *Deserts and Oases of Central Asia*, p. 155.

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were galloped over him until he was dead. Longfellow's stirring poem 'Kambalu' contains a different account of this great historical event.

After the destruction of Baghdad, Cairo became the last great centre of Islam. Egypt, which under Saladin had repulsed the crusaders, became a still greater military power. Based on its regular army of Turkish and Circassian slaves, known as the Mamelukes, it had overthrown the chivalry of France at the battle of Mansurat, as mentioned in Chapter VIII, and in 1260 Baybars, their great general, utterly defeated the Mongols at 'Ain Jalut and retook Damascus, which they had captured after the fall of Baghdad. He subsequently defeated the Mongols at Abulistin in 1277 and at Hims in 1281. This stopped their further progress to the west in Syria. The Mongols remained essentially a land power, and showed no disposition to venture on the sea either in China or in Europe. Thus, as Hudson points out,<sup>1</sup> 'Soldaia, Matricha, Kaffa and Tana came to bear the same relation to the Golden Horde as Olgia, Panticapaeum, Phanagone and Tanais had borne to the Scythians in ancient times'.

The situation was now roughly stabilised in Asia, and the stage was thereby set for the medieval travellers to commence the quest for Cathay.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 144.





CHAPTER VII

JOHN DE PLANO CARPINI VISITS THE *KHÁKAN*

There is towards the East a land which is called Mongal or Tartaria, lying in that part of the worlde which is thought to be most North Easterly. On the East part it hath the country of Kythay and of the people called Solangi: on the South part of the countrey of the Saracens: on the South east the land of the Huini: and on the West the prouince of Naimani: but on the North side it is inuironed with the Ocean Sea.

*John de Plano Carpini*

Kuyuk, the strength of God: God in Heaven and Kuyuk on Earth; the seal of the Lord of all men.

Inscription on the seal of Kuyuk Khan

## CHAPTER VII

### JOHN DE PLANO CARPINI VISITS THE KHÁKAN

THE period lying between the mid-thirteenth and mid-fourteenth centuries was one of the greatest importance in world history because, if only for a century, it brought the West into contact with the East. It demonstrated that the world possessed two centres, each of which firmly believed that it was the only one, and revealed to the West the ancient, flourishing civilization of wealthy China, with all that was implied in this discovery.

In 1243 Innocent IV was elected Pope. Two years later he presided at the Council of Lyons, which had been convened to find means of dealing with the Mongol menace. With almost incredible folly it merely 'advised, besought and entreated all Christian people to block every road or passage by which the enemy could pass, either by means of ditches, walls, build-ings or other contrivances'. So low had Europe fallen!

The Pope had heard rumours of the existence of Christian tribes among the Mongols, and conceived the idea of obtaining their aid against the Moslems. He thereupon decided to despatch John de Plano Carpini, a Franciscan monk, to visit their *Khákan* or 'Supreme Khan,' and thereby started the long line of heroic medieval explorers.<sup>1</sup> The credentials of John and his

<sup>1</sup> This and the following chapter are mainly based on Hakluyt's *John de Plano Carpini and William de Rubruquis*, edited by Sir Raymond Beazley, who reproduces the Hakluyt translation. *William of Rubruck*, by W. W. Rockhill, is also a valuable work which I have consulted. Generally speaking, I have quoted from Hakluyt's delightful translation.



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companion, Friar Benedict the Pole, who acted as interpreter during the first part of the journey, consisted of a letter 'to the King and the Tartar People', warning them to 'avert their onslaughts on Christendom through fear of Divine wrath'. The friars were instructed to preach Christianity to the Mongols and to ascertain exactly what their plans might be regarding Europe. They were also instructed to gain information about Christian tribes. Finally, letters were provided which were to be delivered to the first important chief they should meet. The monks were, in fact, intended to act as intelligence officers, and well did they carry out their task.

From Lyons, Friar John and his companion set out on their long and perilous journey to Mongolia. In April 1245: 'We came to the King of Bohemia . . . who advised us to take our journey through Polonia and Russia. . . . We came unto Conradus, duke of Lautiscia [Mazouia], unto whom then lord Wasilico duke of Russia was come . . . who being earnestly requested by the duke of Cracow . . . conducted us with him, unto his owne land'. The Duke then 'sent us forward with one of his seruants as farre as Kow [Kiev], the chiefe citie of Russia.' There they were advised to change their horses, 'because they knew not howe to digge vp the grasse vnder the snow as the Tartarian horses doe'.

The friars accordingly, in February 1246, continued their journey eastwards on post horses. Upon approaching the country held by the Mongols, 'armed Tartars came rushing vpon vs in vnciuil and horrible maner, but after making inquiries they accepted some food and immediatly departed'. At the camp of the chief of the frontier Tartars the friars paid their respects. 'We were instructed to bow thrise with our left

### *John de Plano Carpini visits the Khákan*

knee before the doore of the tente, and in any case to beware, lest wee set our foote vpon the threshold of the sayd doore. John describes 'the land of Comania, which is al plaine ground' and its four mighty rivers the Neper (Dnieper), the Don the Volga and the Iaec or Ural. However, although he has the credit of being the earliest European traveller to name the first three rivers by their Russian names, he is sadly incorrect in making them all discharge into the Black Sea.

The monks travelled for several days down the Dnieper, which was frozen over, and then along the coast of the Black Sea, which was also frozen over, as I once saw it, and finally they reached the camp of Batu, the founder of the great *Khanate* of the West, generally termed the Golden Horde.<sup>1</sup> Before being received in audience, the monks were told that they must pass between two fires, 'that if you intend any mischiefe against our lord, or bring any poyson with you, fire may take away all euill'. Of Batu John writes that 'he is courteous enough vnto to his owne men, and yet is hee had in great awe by them; he is most cruel in fight: he is exceedingly prudent and politque in warre'.

The most trying section of their long journey, which traversed the vast desert plains of the Ural-Caspian depression from the basin of the Volga to that of the Sir Daria, commenced on Easter day, when 'we departed with many tears, not knowing whether we went to death or to life. And we were so feeble in bodie, that we were scarce able to ride.' As their food had mainly consisted of a scanty supply of millet, it is marvellous that they stood the fatigue of five changes of horses per day.

<sup>1</sup> Horde is derived from *ordu*, or camp. The Urdu language of India originally signified the language used by the Mongol invaders in their camp.



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Traversing thus rapidly the land of Comania and the deserts of the Kangittae, 'we entered into the country of ye Bisermini [Moslems]. . . . In this countrey we found innumerable cities with castles ruined and many towns left desolate.' This was the fertile valley of the Sir Daria, which had been ruined by the Mongols, as mentioned in the previous chapter. After following up the great river for some weeks they at last entered Mongolia.

Carpini's description of the country is excellent: 'In some part thereof it is full of mountains, and in other places plaine and smoothe groundes, but euerie where sandie and barren, neither is the hundredth part thereof fruitfull. . . . And albeit the fore-said lande is otherwise vnfruitfull, yet it is very commodious for the bringing vp of cattell. In certain places thereof are some small store of trees growing, but otherwise it is altogether destitute of woods. Therefore the Emperor, and his noble men and all other warne themselves, and dresse their meate with fires of the dounge of oxen and horses.' When travelling on the Pamirs yaks' 'dounge' was my only fuel, and its pungent smoke was disagreeable and all-pervading.

Of their manners and customs Carpini writes that 'they seldome or neuer fall out among themselves, and, as for fightings or brawlings, wounds or manslaughters, they never happen among them. . . . They are also very hardie, and when they haue fasted a day or two without any maner of sustenance, they sing and are merry as if they had eaten their bellies full. In riding they endure much cold and extreme heat.' But in their relations with other people: 'They are most intollerable exacters, most couetous possessors, and most nigardly giuers. The slaughter of other people is accompted a matter of nothing with them.'



## *John de Plano Carpini visits the Khákan*

Carpini's description of the men of Kytay (Cathay) runs: 'They are pagans, having a special kind of writing by themselves and (as it is reported) the Scriptures of the olde and newe Testament. They have also recorded in hystories the lives of their forefathers: and they have Eremites made after the manner of our Churches, which in those dayes they greatly resorted vnto. . . . They love Christians, and bestowe much almes, and are very courteous and gentle people.' It is interesting to note that China is termed Kitai in the Russian language.

To resume, crossing the country of the Black Kitayans (Kara Kitai), Carpini passed the lake Ala Kul, and finally, 'vpon the day of Maria Magdelene,' we arriued at the Court of Cuyne the Emperour elect'. He had ridden some three thousand miles to reach it.

Carpini writes of the assembled envoys whom he saw: 'In the great square was the duke Jeroslav of Susdal in Ruscia, and several princes of the Kitayans and Solanges, also two sons of the King of Georgia, a soldan, the ambassador of the Calif of Baldach [Baghdad], and more than ten other soldans of the Saracens, I believe, as we were told by the procurators. For there were more than four thousand envoys as well as those bringing tribute as those offering presents, soldans, and other chiefs who had come to present themselves in person, those who had been sent by their rulers, and those who were governors of countries.' Here indeed we gain a deep impression of the immense power of the Mongols.

Friar John gives an interesting account of Kuyuk, whom he describes as being 'of a meane stature, very wise and politike, and passing serious and graue, in all his demeanour. . . . Cer-

<sup>1</sup> July 22, 1246.

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taine Christians of his familie earnestly and strongly affirmed vnto vs, that he himselfe was about to become a Christian. . . . Hee had likewise a Chappell of Christians, neere vnto his great Tent, where the Clearkes . . . according to the custome of the Graecians do sing publiquely.' Yet in spite of his alleged inclination towards Christianity 'the Emperor new elect, together with al his princes, erected a flag of defiance against the Church of God, and the Romane empire. . . . For except Christendom there is no land vnder heauen which they stand in feare of.'

Some four months were spent at Kuyuk's *ordu*, where, apart from the starvation diet, the friars were not badly treated. Much care was shown in the replies that were written, and it was hinted that Mongol envoys should accompany them to Europe. This they were particularly anxious to avoid, as these Mongols might well realise the wars and dissensions that weakened Europe, might act as spies or might possibly be killed by the populace. Fortunately this question was dropped, and in November they started on the homeward journey, reaching Kiev on June 8, where 'the citizens rejoyced ouer us, as ouer men that had been risen from death to life'. Finally, in the autumn of 1247, they presented to the Pope at Lyons the threatening letter of Kuyuk, which ran: 'God has commanded my ancestors and myself to send our people to exterminate the wicked nations. You ask if I am a Christian; God knows, and if the Pope also wishes to know he had better come and see.'

Carpini as an envoy had failed, but his reports and his *Historia Mongalorum* contain much accurate information, which must have been of the greatest value to the Pope in particular and to Christendom in general, and the heroic friar certainly deserves a niche in the temple of fame.



CHAPTER VIII

WILLIAM DE RUBRUQUIS REACHES KARAKORAM



They are wonderfully afraid of thunder; for in the time of thunder they thrust all strangers out of their houses, and then wrapping themselves in black felt, they lie hidden therein til the thunder be ouerpast.

*William de Rubruquis*, ch. 9

A great idea of religious *Weltpolitik* gives character to the travel to China under the *Pax Tatarica*, and imbues it with a will to observe and know which is lacking in the purely commercial travel of antiquity.

G. F. HUDSON, *Europe and China*, p. 135

## CHAPTER VIII

### WILLIAM DE RUBRUQUIS REACHES KARAKORAM

THE terrible Mongol menace was still threatening to engulf Europe, but, incredible as it may appear, King Louis IX was, at this period, organising a crusade against the Mamelukes of Egypt. He landed in Cyprus in 1248, where he received a mission from the Mongol general in Persia, who offered to attack the Moslems and to help him to recover Jerusalem. The envoy informed the King that the *Khákan* and his chiefs had become Christians, as also was his master. This pleasing intelligence was supported to some extent by a letter written by the Constable of Armenia to the King of Cyprus.

Louis's interpreter was Friar Andrew of Longumeau, who was subsequently sent on an embassy to the *Khákan*. Upon arriving at the Mongol court, he found Kuyuk had died and that the Empress *Ogul Gaimish* was ruling, pending the election of a new *Khákan*. During the absence of Friar Andrew of this mission, Louis, who had landed in Egypt in the spring of 1249, had been utterly defeated at the Battle of Mansurat and had been taken prisoner by the Mamelukes. In the spring of 1250, after payment of a heavy ransom, he had been released and, with the remnants of his army, had landed in Palestine. There, in the following year, he received Friar Andrew. The reply to his letters was to the effect that, unless the King sent tribute every year, 'nous destruirons toy et ta gent aussi comme nous avons fait caulz que nous avons devant nommez'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joinville, *Life of St. Louis*, p. 148.



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Louis naturally regretted that this mission had brought back such a hostile reply, but yet he learned much of value about the Mongols, their manners and their customs. Among other things the Friar informed him that the Tartars lived in a sandy waste at the eastern extremity of the world near some rocky mountains behind which, he alleged, were imprisoned the people of Gog and Magog. This was undoubtedly a reference to the Great Wall of China.<sup>1</sup> Of greater immediate interest was the report that Sartach, son of the great conqueror Batu, was undoubtedly a Christian. Relying on the accuracy of his report, Louis decided to despatch a monk to the court of this prince.

William de Rubruquis, who was selected for this difficult and delicate task, was a Franciscan, and there is every reason to believe that he had met Carpini and had discussed the Mongol question with him. His companion was Bartholomew of Cremona and his interpreter is referred to as *Homo Dei*. In view of the insulting nature of the letter of *Ogul Gaimish*, it was decided that Rubruquis was not to be an accredited envoy, but was to declare that Louis had heard of the conversion of Sartach to Christianity and had sent him to preach the gospel at his court.

Starting from Acre in 1252, Rubruquis spent a year at Constantinople, where he certainly collected much valuable information, and it was not until the spring of 1253 that he 'entered into the sea . . . which the Bulgarians call the great sea'. Did not Chaucer write of his 'verray parfit gentil knight'?

At Lyceys was he, and at Sutalye,  
Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete Sea  
At many a noble aryve hadde he be.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This subject is dealt with in Chapter XI, p. 155.

<sup>2</sup> Lyceys is Laïas or Ayas, the harbour at which the elder Polos reached the Mediterranean Sea, and Sutalye (now Adalia) is a port situated along the coast to the west.



### *William de Rubruquis reaches Karakoram*

Landing at Soldaia or Sudak in the Crimea, Rubruquis proceeded inland, travelling with four covered carts drawn by oxen. On the third day's march, he first met Tartars and carefully described them in his diary. 'When they will prouoke any man, they pul him by the eares to the drinks, and so lug and draw him strongly to stretch out his throate clapping their handes and dauncing before him.' Of the women he gives a detailed account of their clothes, concluding with the remark — 'these gentlewomen are exceeding fat, and the lesser their noses be, the fairer are they esteemed: they daube ouer their sweet faces with grease too shamefully'. And again: 'As touching mariages, your Highnes is to understand that no man can haue a wife among them till he hath bought her: whereupon sometimes their maids are very stale before they be married, for their parents alwaies keep them till they can sel them'. Among the Kirghiz whom I met on the Pamirs the difficulty always was for the young fellows to find the hundred sheep which was the usual price for a girl, and one of my hunters, when paid off, counted his wages as representing so many sheep! As rich men marry many wives, there are not enough to go round among these nomads. Finally, 'her father saith unto the bridegrome: Loe, my daughter is yours, take her wheresoever you can find her. Then he and his friends seek for her till they can find her, and hauing found her, hee must take her by force and cary her, as it were, violently vnto his owne house.' Marriage by rape is still the custom among the Tartars. Of their burial he writes: 'If any of their nobles (being of the stock of Chingis, who was their first lord and father) deceaseth, his sepulcher is vnknownen'. To ensure this in the case of Chengiz Khan, every man or woman who was met by the

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funeral cortège was put to death.

The Tartars were naturally inquisitive as to the object of the monks' journey and begged for everything they saw with such importunity that, after his first encounter with them, Rubruquis wrote: 'In very deed it seemed to me y<sup>t</sup> we were escaped out of the hands of diuels'. In describing the country through which he was passing we read: 'Beyond Russia lieth the countrey of Prussia, which the Dutch Knights of the order of Saint Maries hospitall of Jerusalem haue of late wholly conquered and subdued'. This constitutes an interesting reference to the Teutonic Knights who began the conquest of pagan Prussia in 1230.

In due course, travelling very slowly in the ox-drawn carts, Rubruquis 'arriued at the banke of the mightie riuier Tanais which diuideth Asia from Europa, even as the riuier Nilus of Aegypt disjoyneth Asia from Africa'. Later on he writes: 'Beyond is the riuier of Etelia or Volga,<sup>1</sup> which is ye mightiest riuier that euer I saw. And it . . . disinboqueth into a certain lake containing in circuit the space of 4 moneths travel'. To Rubruquis, then, we owe the first accurate account of the discharge of the Volga into the Caspian Sea, which he terms the Sea of Sirsan (Shirwan).

Sartach, the son of Batu, received the monks in a friendly manner. His Master of Ceremonies was 'a certaine Nestorian named Coiat', who 'commanded us to inuest our selues in our

<sup>1</sup> The Volga is the Oaros of Herodotus. Ptolemy termed it the Rha, while Menander calls it Attila. The *Catalan Atlas* continues this name in Edyl, although both Carpini and Rubruquis had called it correctly. The Polos termed it the Tigris. Rubruquis also describes the Caspian Sea in some detail and emphatically states that it is entirely surrounded by land. Herodotus definitely laid down that 'it is separate and by itself', but later Greek geographers down to Ptolemy believed in the Gulf theory. Here again, as in the question of the nature of silk, we have a remarkable instance of the fluctuation of knowledge before the era of printing.



### *William de Rubruquis reaches Karakoram*

vestiments that we might goe before his Lord: and wee did so. Then I my selfe putting on our most precious ornaments, tooke in mine armes a very faire cushion, and the Bible which your Majesty gaue me. . . . Mine associate tooke a missal and a crosse: and the clearke hauing put on his surplesse, took a censer in his hand. . . . Then we entred in singing *Salue Regina*. Sartach, probably fearing to be accused of intriguing with foreign envoys, decided to send the monks to Batu, and Rubruquis sums him up as follows: 'Now as concerning Sartach, whether he beleeueth in Christ or no, I knowe not. . . . He hath about him certaine Nestorian Priestes, who pray vpon their beades and sing their deuotions.' It seems probable that the Mongols were watching the struggles of Christendom against Islam, and the utter defeat of King Louis in Egypt must have influenced them in favour of the creed of Muhammad, which was ultimately adopted by the Golden Horde and by the Il-Khans of Persia.

The Friars were well received by Batu, whom Rubruquis thus admonished: 'you shal not obtain the joyes of heauen, vnles you become a Christian'. Batu, in turn, wisely decided that he could not allow these Christian monks bearing letters from King Louis to remain at his court 'without the knowledge and consent of Mangu-Can'. This was a blow to Rubruquis, 'who was very corpulent and heauy'. However, there was no help for it and, as in the case of Carpini, their severe trials now began.

Rubruquis had struck the Volga much higher up than Carpini had done and, generally speaking, followed a more northerly line across Central Asia than that of his predecessor, avoiding the Sir Daria altogether. Crossing the Talas River,



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where he struck Carpini's route, he approached mountains: 'And I enquired what mountains they were, which I vnderstood to be the mountains of Caucasus, which are stretched forth and continued on both parts to the sea, from the West vnto the East: and on the West part they are conjoynd vnto the fore-said Caspian Sea'. The mountains Rubruquis saw were the Ala tau. Like the classical writers, he believed that there was but one range, to wit the Caucasus, which crossed Asia.

Rubruquis refers time and again to the Nestorian Christians, who have already been mentioned in earlier chapters. At the beginning of the eleventh century, the Kerait Turks, who ranged the steppes to the south of Lake Baikal, were converted to Christianity in a body. Abdishu, the Metropolitan of Merv, reported to the Catholicus that their king was overtaken by a snowstorm while hunting and had despaired of finding his way to safety, when there appeared to him a vision of a saint, who promised to save him if he became a Christian. The Chief was saved and, with his tribe, 200,000 strong, immediately adopted Christianity. This conversion was actually due to Christian merchants, and through their propaganda Christianity returned to China, where in the thirteenth century we read of a Christian community at Khanbalik. In Chapter VI I have referred to the connexion of Chengiz Khan with the Kerait and Naiman tribes.

To resume, 'hauing passed ouer the foresaide Alpes . . . we entred into a most beautiful plaine . . . and on the left hand of vs a certain Sea or lake, which containeth fifteene dayes journey in circuite'. This *Lacus Magnus* was Lake Balkash, of which the Friar was the discoverer.

His descriptions of the Buddhist and Tartar diviners is most

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interesting, but he pours contempt on the Christians: 'The Nestorians know nothing. They say their offices, and have sacred books in Syrian, but they do not know the language and they are utterly depraved.' Rubruquis throughout evinces his fanatical hatred of the Oriental Christians, but it is only fair to point out that they alone gained any influence among the Tartars, whereas the Latin monks failed to do so. How deplorable was this attitude, which was the rule and not the exception!

Rubruquis is remarkably well informed about the Uighurs: 'These Iugurs used to inhabit the cities, which first obeyed Chingis chan. . . . And Caracarum is as it were in their territory, and all the land of the King or the Prester John and of Unc his brother, was round about this country. . . . So it happened that the Moal adopted their letters, and they are their best scribes.' We learn from other sources that Chengiz Khan engaged a Uighur, Tata-tungo by name, to teach his sons letters and to apply the Uighur script to the language of the Mongols. To quote again: 'They begin to write at the top of their paper drawing their lines right downe: and so they read and multiply their lines from the left hand to the right'.

To continue: 'Next vnto them, between the foresaid mountaines Eastward, inhabiteth the nation of Tangut. . . . They have oxen of great strength, with tailes like vnto horses, and with long shagge hair vpon their bakes and bellyes. They haue legges greater then other oxen haue, and they are exceedingly fierce. . . . Next vnto them are the people of Tebet . . . they make fine cups of the skulls of their parents, to the ende that when they drinke out of them they may amidst all their jollities and delights call their dead parents to remembrance.'



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Rubruquis, concluding his valuable survey, writes of 'great Cathaya, the inhabitants whereof (as I suppose) were of olde time, called Seres. For from them are brought most excellent stufes of silke'. The intelligent Friar was thus the first European to identify Cathay with the country of the Seres.<sup>1</sup>

Passing the Ala Kul, which Friar John took to be a part of Lake Balkash, on the feast of St. John the Evangelist (December 27) the tired travellers reached the *ordu* of the *Khákan*, where they were assigned a miserable hut, whereas a big dwelling was allotted to their guide.

Searching enquiries were made of Rubruquis as to the reasons underlying his journey, and, in view of the Tartar severity towards spies, he was fortunate in not being put to death. His story, however, was accepted and an audience by the *Khákan* was granted to him. Singing a hymn, the Latin monks entered the presence of Mangu: 'The house was all covered inside with a cloth of gold and there was a fire . . . in a grate in the centre of the dwelling. . . . Mangu was seated on a couch and was dressed in a skin spotted and glossy, like a seal's skin. He is a little man, of medium height, aged forty-five years, and a young wife sat beside him.' Mangu 'appeared to me to be tipsy', and the interpreter of the Friar was drunk, so they saluted him and retired. One of the interpreters put many questions 'about the kingdom of France, whether there were many sheep and cattle and horses there, and whether they had not better go there at once and take it'. Later, an interpreter informed Rubruquis that 'Mangu Chan takes compassion on you and allows you to stay here for the space of two months: Then the great cold will be over'.

<sup>1</sup> The Hakluyt text ends at this point.





MANGU KHAN WITH HIS WIVES AND SONS

From a manuscript of *Jamī' al-Tawārīkh*, circa A.D. 1315

Martin: *Miniature Painting and Painters*, Bernard Quaritch, Ltd.



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Mangu Khan's mother, Suirkukiti, was a member of the Christian Kerait tribe, and consequently we read with special interest that on one occasion the *Khákan* 'confided to me his creed'. 'We Moal', he said, 'believe that their is only one God by whom we live and by whom we die, and for whom we have an upright heart. But as God gives us the different fingers of the hand, so he gives to men divers ways. . . . God gave you the Scriptures, and you do not keep them; He gave us diviners, we do what they tell us, and we live in peace.'

Accompanying the court of Mangu, in due course Karakoram was reached: 'You must know that, exclusive of the palace of the Chan, it is not as big as the village of St. Denis and the monastery of Saint Denis is ten times larger than the palace'. Here Rubruquis was the guest of Master William, a French goldsmith, and 'we found there also another person, Basil by name, the son of an Englishman, who was born in Hungary'. He may well have been the first Englishman to penetrate into Mongolia.

When the cold season was ended Rubruquis received a letter to King Louis, which included the following: 'The commandments of the eternal God are what we impart to you. . . . But if you understand it and shall not give heed to it, nor believe it, saying: "Our country is far off, our mountains are strong, our sea is wide" and in this belief you make war against us, you shall find out what we can do.'

Rubruquis on the return journey reached the *ordu* of Batu just one year after his departure from it. He then passed through the Iron Gate at Darband, which constitutes one of the strongest medieval fortresses I have visited, and merits a brief digression. The great fortress was situated at a point where the spurs of



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the main range of the Caucasus came down to the Caspian Sea. Along these spurs a wall fortified with strong towers was constructed which actually ran down into the sea, while, as the old chronicler wrote: 'La vie est mout estroit entre la montagne et la mer'. Small wonder it is that, in the description of this, the celebrated *Sadd-i-Iskandar* or 'Barrier of Alexander', we read that the Great Macedonian drove the savage cannibal tribes beyond this barrier and closed it with gates of iron. Nor need we wonder that Matthew of Paris identified the Tartars with these cannibals.

Noting that 'the Alans in these mountains still held out against the Tartars', the Friar continued on his way and reached Shamakha, a port on the Caspian to the north of Baku, which was later visited by Jenkinson, and entering Armenia, he traversed that country to Iconium. His great journey finally ended, in the summer of 1255, at Acre.

Yule describes Rubruquis as 'an honest, pious, stout-hearted, acute and most intelligent observer, keen in the acquisition of knowledge; the author, in fact, of one of the best narratives of travel in existence'.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to add that Roger Bacon writes that he had not only met Rubruquis, and discussed his journeys with him, but had diligently studied his report. Indeed, he embodied most of it in his *Opus Majus*.<sup>2</sup> Yet, but for Bacon, the work of Rubruquis was forgotten until, more than three centuries later, Hakluyt repaired this injustice.

There has been much discussion as to the comparative merits of the two great travellers which I deprecate. Carpini was the pioneer who undertook the terrible journey across Asia on horseback eight years before Rubruquis appeared on the scene,

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, xxi, 47.

<sup>2</sup> i, 354 et seq.

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and thus gains the higher honours as an explorer, while both Friars gave excellent reports which, generally speaking, confirmed one another. Both, when all things are considered, were extraordinarily successful in carrying through their dangerous and delicate tasks, and if Carpini had the advantage of being an accredited Envoy, Rubruquis profited greatly from the reports of his predecessor. Personally I hold that both men were of exceptional capacity. I also consider that both Carpini, who was an envoy, and Rubruquis, whose position was an especially delicate one, were well treated by the *Khákans*, albeit they both entirely failed to convert them to Christianity.

To conclude this chapter, Hayton, who reigned in Little Armenia or Cilicia from 1224 to 1269, realising the irresistible power of the Mongols, acknowledged himself the vassal of the *Khákan*. About 1248 he sent his brother Sempad on a mission to Kuyuk. Sempad was well received and brought back satisfactory orders from Kuyuk.<sup>1</sup> Upon the accession of Mangu, Batu summoned Hayton to proceed to the *ordu* of the *Khákan*. Travelling in disguise across Turkish states whose rulers regarded him as their enemy, he reached Kars, the central Mongol camp in Great Armenia, early in 1254. He then visited Batu on the Volga, and thence proceeded to Karakoram.

Mangu received him graciously and he was granted 'a diploma attested by a seal, to prevent anyone troubling either him or his country. He received likewise a letter of enfranchisement of the churches throughout the country.'

Upon his return journey he passed through Almalik (Kulja)

<sup>1</sup> From Samarcand he wrote the interesting letter to the King and Queen of Cyprus, which St. Louis read. In it he exaggerated the influence of Christianity in the Far East, presumably in justification of Hayton's submission to the Mongols. It is quoted in Yule's *Cathay*, etc., i, 162.



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and Talas, 'where they saw Hulavu (Hulagu) the brother of Mangu Khan, who had received the East for his allotment of territory'. Continuing westwards, the royal party turned aside to meet Sartach, and, leaving his camp, they passed through Otrar to Samarcand and Bokhara. Crossing the Oxus they entered Persia, visiting Merv, Sarakhs and Tus. They then travelled, by a route which I have followed, to Mazanderan and crossed the Elburz Mountains to Rei, from which city the main caravan route was followed to Tabriz. Hayton finally reached his kingdom in July 1255, where he was welcomed with great rejoicings, owing to the decrease of tribute and other benefits that he was able to announce.

Among the stories of his travels Hayton related that there was a nation of Ghotaians or Cathayans. 'In their country', he continued, 'there were many idolaters who worshipped a clay image which they called Shakemonia, and another god called Madri'. Here we undoubtedly have a reference to Buddhism with its last Buddha, the deified sage Sakya-Muni, and its coming Buddha Maitreya, of whom they had made a clay image of colossal size. Moreover, the royal traveller heard of a people beyond Cathay whose women had the use of reason like men, while the males were great hairy dogs!

To conclude, this journey closes a great period of exploration, which is illuminated by the remarkable journeys of exceptionally gifted travellers.



CHAPTER IX

THE ELDER POLOS VISIT KUBILAI KHAN

It makes one marvel to consider the immense extent of the journeys made, first by the Father and Uncle of Messer Marco Polo, when they proceeded continually towards the East-North-East, all the way to the Court of the Great Can and the Emperor of the Tartars; and afterwards again by the three of them when, on their return homeward, they traversed the Eastern and Indian Seas.

From Ramusio's Preface to the Book of Marco Polo  
Dated Venice, *7th July* 1553

## CHAPTER IX

### THE ELDER POLOS VISIT KUBILAI KHAN

MONKS had played a heroic rôle in acting as the pioneer explorers of remote Mongolia. They were now succeeded by Venetian merchants, who first crossed Asia from the Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>1</sup> These merchants were reliable travellers who, knowing both the Turkish and the Tartar languages, supplemented the valuable reports of their great predecessors. But, before dealing with this wonderful series of land journeys and sea voyages, we must turn aside to discuss briefly the celebrated work in which they were enshrined, and how it came to be written.

In 1298, some three years after his return to Venice, Marco Polo commanded a galley in a naval action with the Genoese which was fought off Curzola.<sup>2</sup> The Venetians were utterly defeated by their opponents, who took seven thousand prisoners, including Marco. During the period of his imprisonment at Genoa, according to his biographer Ramusio, he was visited constantly by the Genoese and grew so tired of telling his

<sup>1</sup> I have consulted Yule's classic, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (1903 edition), which contains valuable notes by the late Henri Cordier. A second work of great importance is the English edition of Professor Benedetto's *Marco Polo: Il Milione*, published by the 'Broadway Travellers' in 1931. Apart from the new material embodied in the text, Sir Denison Ross has supplied a noteworthy index. Frampton's *Marco Polo*, skilfully edited by N. M. Penzer, contains the best description of the itineraries, supplemented by excellent maps, some of which are being used in this work. Finally, Sir Raymond Beazley's *Dawn of Modern Geography* remains indispensable. I have, generally speaking, quoted from the 'Broadway Travellers' edition.

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting account of this naval battle *vide* Yule, *op. cit.* p. 45 *et seq.*



## *The Quest for Cathay*

adventures that he decided that they must be written down and published. Accordingly, he wrote to his father to send him the notes and memoranda which he had made. When these documents were received, Marco, according to Ramusio, dictated his adventures to Rustichello, a well-known writer of French Arthurian legends. The famous manuscript containing Rustichello's work is known as the *Geographical Text* (fr. 11116).

We now turn to the new light shed on this difficult question by Professor Benedetto of the University of Florence, who discovered some eighty unknown manuscripts. But, although they may be grouped into those resembling Rustichello's French text and those in Italian, Benedetto believes that they all descend from a prototype which was not itself the original. Benedetto has studied Rustichello's other works, and his final opinion is that Rustichello did not copy down at Marco's dictation, as Ramusio would have us believe, but, utilising the material placed at his disposal by the Venetian prisoner, wove it into a book. Taking into consideration all the facts, it would appear that Benedetto has come to the right conclusion in a difficult and complicated question. It remains to add that Marco, as Benedetto observes, intended to give Europe a comprehensive picture of the unknown continents of Asia and Africa. This view is supported by the fact that the earliest French version of his travels is termed *Le Divisament dou Monde*. Moreover, he does not claim to have visited every place he describes, and it is clear that his description of Russia and the other countries visited by the elder Polos is based on their accounts.

In the previous chapter we have seen Rubruquis gave a remarkable description of Mangu, who was *Khákan* from 1248 to

## *The Elder Polos visit Kubilai Khan*

his death in 1257. His successor was his brother Kubilai, under whom the Mongol dynasty reached the zenith of its power and civilisation, and, before commencing the epoch-making journeys of the Polos, it is perhaps worth while to point out what the *Pax Tatarica* signified.

The Mongols, so far as both Europe and Asia were concerned, had ended their destructive stage; and now, thanks to the fact of their tolerant rule extending from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean, mutual knowledge and communication between Europe and China were restored after a complete break lasting for more than four centuries. Indeed the journeys of the Polos and their successors gave to Europe the first real knowledge of China, which, though dazzling and overwhelming the medieval mind in the first impact, was destined to have the most important results. The growing effectiveness of this contact was primarily due to the fact that the journeys of a few traders, bent merely on gain, were succeeded by those of monks and Venetian merchants, men appointed to be diplomatic representatives, men of outstanding intelligence and personality.

In China the Tang dynasty had fallen in 907, and, after a period of anarchy, in 960 the Sung dynasty, which survived until 1280, ruled southern China. This was a period of extreme seclusion which was only ended by the Mongol conquest completed by Kubilai.

To come to the first of their great journeys, the elder Polos, Niccolo and Maffeo, were jewellers of Venice who owned a house at Soldaia or Sudak, the most important commercial settlement of Italian merchants in the Black Sea. Returning to it from Constantinople in 1260, they decided to proceed inland and visit Barka Khan, the younger brother and second



## *The Quest for Cathay*

successor to Batu. They were made welcome by the Mongol prince and, in accordance with the custom, they presented the whole of their jewels to him, receiving in return at least twice the value of their gift. Barka, the first Moslem ruler of the Golden Horde, like Batu, dwelt at Sarai, of which Chaucer wrote:

At Sarray, in the lond of Tartarye,  
Ther dwelte a king, that werreyed Russye,  
Thurgh which ther deyde many a doughty man:  
This noble King was cleped Cambinskan.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note that Chaucer, who obviously had some contact with Marco's great work, erroneously made Cambinskan, or Chengiz Khan, the hero of it and staged it at Sarai.<sup>2</sup>

Actually in this poem Chaucer describes the glories of Kubilai at Cambaluc in lines which serve as the motto to Chapter XII. To add to the confusion, Chaucer wrote of the second son of Cambinskan: 'The other sone was cleped Cambalo'.

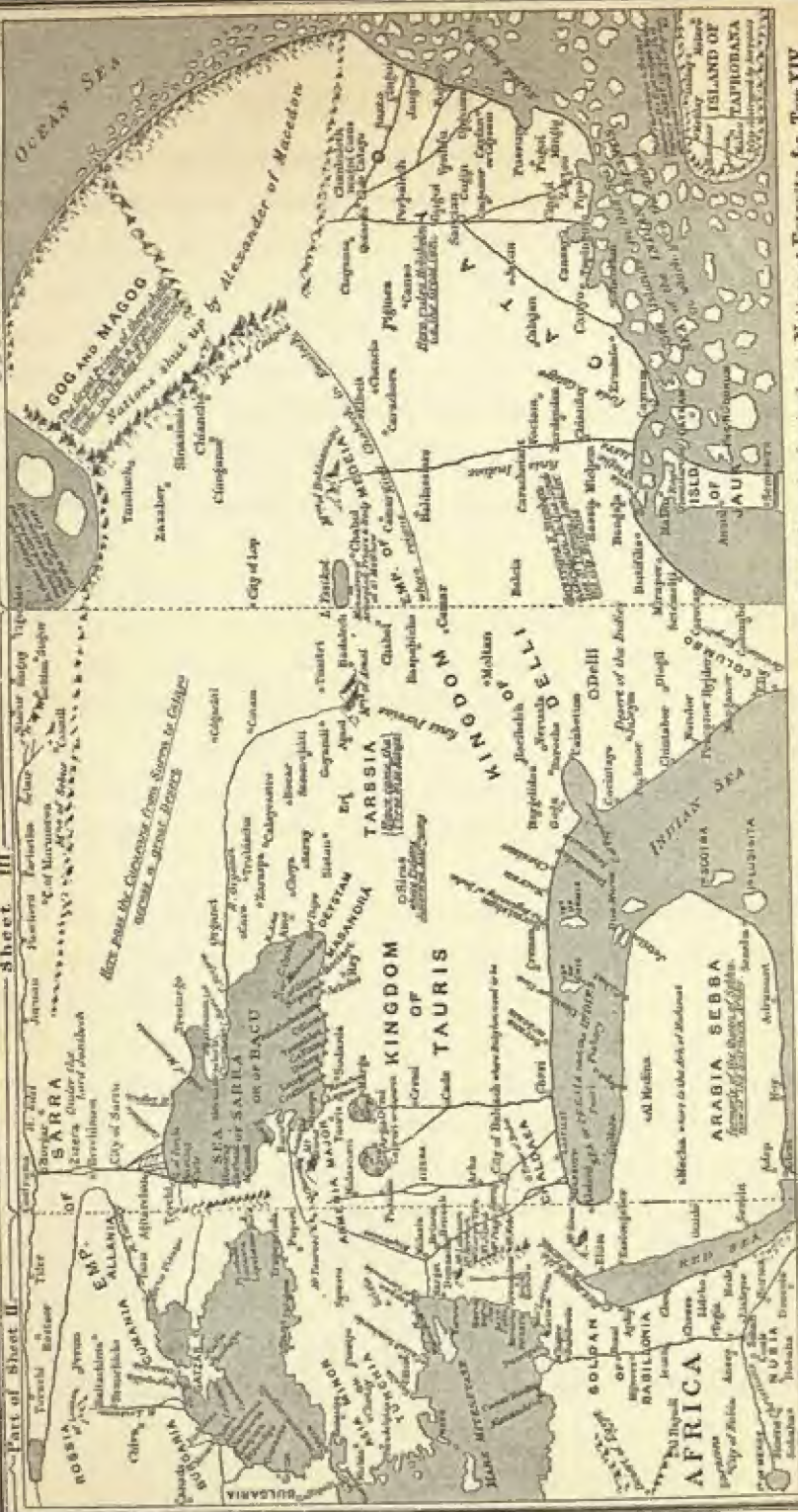
When the Polos had resided at Barka's court for a year, war broke out between him and Hulaku, in which the captor of Baghdad was the victor.<sup>3</sup> The country to the south and west thereby became unsafe for merchants, and the brothers, with remarkable initiative, decided to make for Bokhara to the east. Starting from Bolgar, the northern limit of the Khan's dominions, they crossed the Volga, which they misnamed the Tigris. They then traversed a land occupied by nomads, which

<sup>1</sup> From 'The Squyeres Tale'.

<sup>2</sup> Sarai is now Tsarev. The ancient Sarai was so well known that, in the famous Catalan map of 1375, the Caspian Sea is called 'The Sea of Sarra'.

<sup>3</sup> Marco gives an account of the great battle fought in a plain to the north of the Iron Gates of Derbent. *Vide* 'Broadway Travellers' edition, pp. 394-401.





ASIA, from Sheets II. III & IV. of the CATALAN MAP of 1375, reduced, and condensed from the facsimiles in Notices et Extraits, &c., Tom. XIV.





### *The Elder Polos visit Kubilai Khan*

included a great desert, and duly reached Bokhara, which they described as 'the finest city in the whole of Persia'. It is still one of the great cities of Asia, surrounded by high walls and celebrated for its silks, its tiles and its furs, and was the chief city of the Chagatai Khans at that period.

The Polos were held up at Bokhara for three years, being neither able to return home as they wished, nor to move eastwards—so unsafe were the caravan routes. But the situation was suddenly transformed by the arrival of an envoy, who had been sent by Hulaku Khan on a mission to Kubilai. This envoy informed the merchants that Kubilai was most anxious to see some Latins, and that they would be warmly welcomed at his court. Accepting this fortunate chance of a safe escort, the intrepid Polos continued their journey eastwards to Samarcand, which they described to Marco as 'a very great and noble city. The inhabitants are Christians and Saracens. . . . It has splendid gardens, and a plain full of all the fruits one could possibly desire.' This description held good when I visited Samarcand some forty years ago. Travelling eastwards for about a year stage by stage, instead of riding post in hunger and cold as their unfortunate predecessors had done, they crossed Central Asia.

Finally their long journey came to an end at the court of the *Khákan*, where Kubilai 'was greatly pleased at their arrival'. The Venetian merchants evidently interested the *Khákan* deeply. 'Many questions he asked them: first about their emperors, how they governed their lands according to justice and how they went out to battle. . . . After that, he questioned them concerning the Lord Pope and all the affairs of the Roman Church, and all the customs of the Latins.' The brothers



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answered him 'well and wisely as befits wise men like them, who well knew the Tartar and Turkish languages'. This knowledge of the languages of Asia accounts for much of the success of the Polos.

Kubilai was indeed greatly pleased with the Polo brothers, so much so that he decided to send them as his envoys to the Pope with one of his barons. He drew up letters, in which he requested His Holiness 'to send him some hundred wise men learned in the law of Christ, conversant in the Seven Arts'.<sup>1</sup> The Great Lord further bade the two brothers bring him some oil from the lamp that burns above God's Sepulchre in Jerusalem. He furthermore caused a golden tablet to be given them, the possession of which ensured them transport, board and escort throughout Asia. The envoys, thus supplied, started off on their long journey westwards, and 'when they had ridden some distance the Tartar baron . . . fell sick . . . and remained behind'. Probably they were not sorry to leave him, and thus avoided many difficult complications.

No details as to the route followed on the return journey are given, but it took three long years to accomplish, and finally the Polos struck the Mediterranean Sea at Laias or Ayas, the port in the Gulf of Alexandretta. They reached Acre in April 1269, and received news of the death of Pope Clement. They reported their Mission to Tebaldo of Piacenza, 'who was Legate of the Church of Rome for the whole Kingdom of Egypt'. As the latter advised them to await the election of a new Pope, the Polos decided to return home and finally reached Venice in safety. They had accomplished a most important

<sup>1</sup> The seven arts were rhetoric, logic, grammar, arithmetic, astronomy, music and geometry.



THE ELDER POLOS RECEIVED BY KUBILAI KHAN  
From *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Early 15th century MS.  
Bodleian Library





*The Elder Polos visit Kubilai Khan*

journey and undoubtedly supplied much of the information which Marco subsequently embodied in his work. But still greater journeys lay before them, which would crown the Polo family with imperishable fame.



CHAPTER X

MARCO POLO TRAVERSES ASIA TO THE PERSIAN GULF



High on a throne of royal state, which far  
Outshone the wealth of Ormus and of Ind,  
Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand  
Showers on her kings barbaric pearl and gold,  
Satan exalted sat.

*Paradise Lost*, book ii, lines 1-5

Marco Polo was incomparably the greatest traveller and the most magnificent observer of the whole Middle Ages, shining among the others—good as they are—like Apollo among the hinds of Admetus.

EILEEN POWER

## CHAPTER X

### MARCO POLO TRAVERSES ASIA TO THE PERSIAN GULF

THE Polos, great travellers as they undoubtedly were, evidently became restless at Venice after awaiting in vain the election of a new Pope for two years, and decided that they could not delay their return to the court of Kubilai indefinitely. Accordingly, in 1271, 'they departed from Venice, taking with them the boy Marco, and went straight to Acre'. In these few words Marco Polo, son of Niccolo, a youth of seventeen, makes his appearance on the stage of world exploration.

At Acre the Polos discussed matters with the Legate, and may well have met Prince Edward of England (afterwards Edward I), who was at Acre at this period, as was also Rustichello. The travellers then visited Jerusalem, 'to fetch some of the oil of Christ's sepulchre' as instructed by the *Khdkan*. Returning once again to Acre, the Legate prepared letters for Kubilai Khan and the Polos started off for Laias. When they arrived there they found that the roads were closed, and, while delayed on this account, they were summoned back to Acre by Tebaldo, who had finally been elected Pope. The King of Armenia prepared an armed galley and sent them back to Acre, where the Pope 'received them honorably and gave them his blessing. . . . Then he caused new letters to be prepared for the Great Lord . . . and appointed many gifts of crystal for him'. He also selected two friars to accompany the party 'with full powers to ordain bishops, and bind and unbind even as he himself'. The Polos, thus reinforced, again landed at Laias,

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but when they had arrived there, Bondocdaire,<sup>1</sup> 'who was Sultan of Babylon, came to Armenia with a large host, doing great damage throughout the country'.

The cowardly friars, unlike heroic Carpini and Rubruquis, would not face the dangers that threatened them on the journey, although they were travelling under especially favourable conditions, and abandoned the quest. To quote Marco: 'If men had been sent by the Pope, capable of preaching our faith to these peoples, the Great Khan would have become a Christian, for it is known for certain that he was greatly desirous of doing so'.

So far we have been relying on the prologue, but now Marco commences his description of the countries of Asia, in which connexion it must always be remembered that he was writing a general account.

He naturally begins his great work with Lesser Armenia or Cilicia, of which Laias is described as a great centre for trade. He then refers to the province of Turcomania (Anatolia) with its cities of Iconium, Kaisariya and Sivas, and passes on to Greater Armenia with Arzingan and Erzerum. He notes that 'in the centre of Greater Armenia, there is a very great and high cup-shaped mountain, on which it is said that Noah's Ark rested'. He continues this account of Mount Ararat with a description of Georgia, noting the oil of Baku, and mentions that the country, owing to its 'great mountains and narrow and strong defiles, had not been entirely subdued by the Mongols'. He concludes this general description by stating that 'the sea

<sup>1</sup> Here we have a most interesting contemporary mention of the famous Mameluke Sultan Baybars, who adopted the title of *Bandugdar*, or 'Arbalaster', from an Amir who had purchased him as a slave. As mentioned in Chapter VI, he defeated the Mongols in three battles.



## *Marco Polo traverses Asia to the Persian Gulf*

of Ghelukan or Abaco is like a lake. . . . The Euphrates, the Tigris, the Jon and many other rivers flow into it. All round it are mountains and towns. Recently Genoese merchants have taken to sailing on it, having placed thereon ships of their own. From here comes the silk called *ghelle*.<sup>1</sup> These two names for the Caspian Sea are derived from the province of Gilan—whence also *ghelle* silk, and from Baku. We have noted in the previous chapter that it was also termed 'the Sea of Sarra'. Marco naturally repeats the error of the elder Polos in terming the Volga the Tigris, but the fact that he adds the Euphrates, tends to prove that he never visited Baghdad. The Jon or Jihun is now termed the Amu Daria or Oxus.<sup>1</sup> It is especially interesting to note the initiative of the Genoese in their quest for silk. They must have taken advantage of the great easterly bend of the Don to effect a portage of their ships from that river to the Volga, and thence across the Caspian. What splendid pioneers they must have been!

To the south the kingdom of Mosul, 'with its cloths of silk and gold called mosulins'—whence our muslin—is mentioned. A reference is also made to the Kurds, who 'for the most part are Nestorian and Jacobite Christians, but some of them are Saracens, worshipping Mahomet. They are a bold and wicked people, and delight in plundering merchants.'

Baghdad, or Baudac, is next described as a great city: 'The merchants who wish to go to India descend the river as far as a city called Kisi and there enter the sea of India. I will add, too, that on this river, between Baudac and Kisi, there is a great city called Bastra [Basra], and in the woods all round the

<sup>1</sup> The question of the change of the course of this wayward river is dealt with in Chapter XVI, p. 221.

## *The Quest for Cathay*

city grow the finest dates in the world.' Marco also gives an account of the capture of Baghdad by Hulaku Khan, which occurred in 1258.

I have given an outline of the countries of Western Asia described by Marco and I now proceed to identify his route. Yule traces it as running approximately north to Kaisariya, and as then trending eastwards through Sivas, and Arzingan. He next, in my opinion erroneously, makes the travellers turn southwards to strike the Tigris at Mosul and to follow it down to Baghdad and Basra, and so to Kisi and Hormuz.<sup>1</sup> I challenged this theory in 1902,<sup>2</sup> and pointed out that Marco Polo would hardly have termed the Volga the Tigris, and have left the splendid Tigris itself nameless. Nor could he possibly have made such a mistake in his description of Kisi, an island situated nearly two hundred miles down the Persian Gulf. Again, Marco not only describes Iran from Tabriz but gives his land journey in detail from Yezd south-eastwards to Kirman and then southwards to Hormuz, and this fact alone would appear to upset Yule's theory.<sup>3</sup>

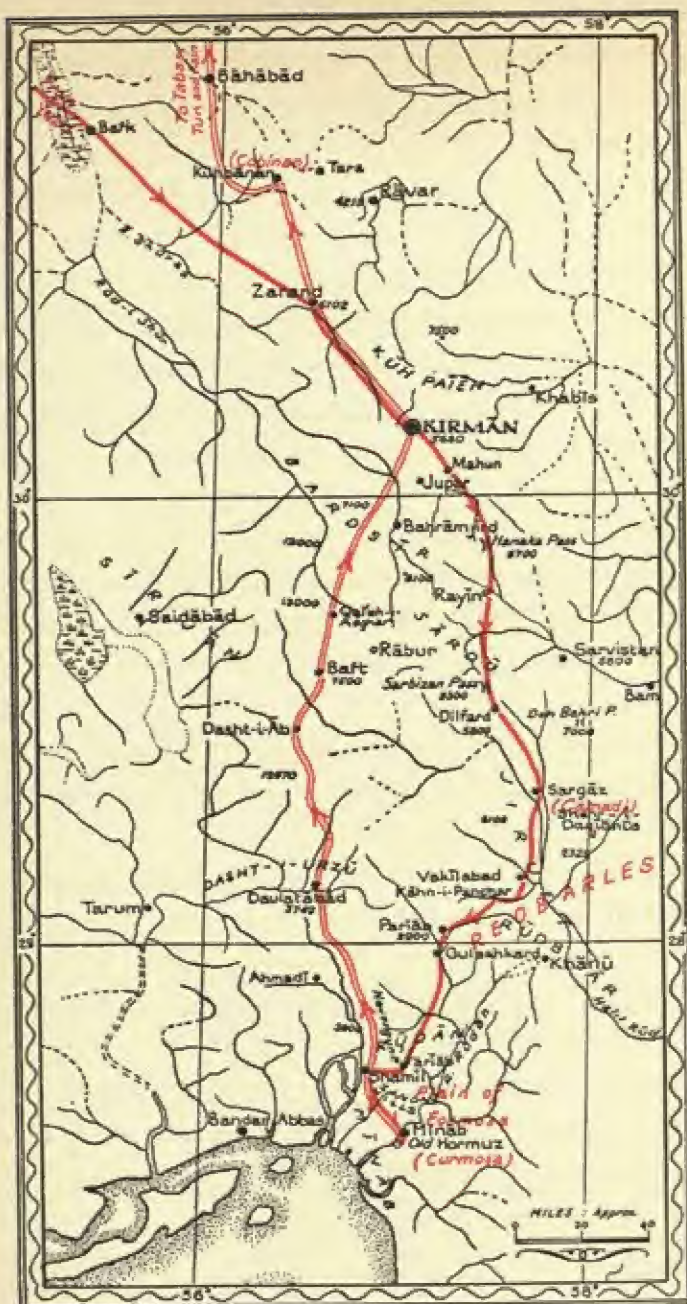
Marco, it would seem, was unable to use the direct caravan route to Tabriz owing to the Mameluke raid. Accordingly he travelled across Asia Minor, by way of Sivas, Erzerum and Arzizi (Arjish), to Tabriz, which was an important trade centre. He mentions that 'wares are brought thither from India, Baudac, Mosul and Cormos [Hormuz], and from many other regions besides, and Latin merchants, especially Genoese,

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Yule's itinerary map facing page i in vol. i of the Cordier edition of 1903.

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, pp. 262-3.

<sup>3</sup> In the *Dawn of Geography*, iii, p. 49, Sir Raymond Beazley accepts my view, as does Mr Penzer in John Frampton's *Marco Polo* (Argonaut Press), Introduction, p. xxxv.





MARCO POLO'S ITINERARY FROM KIRMAN TO THE COAST







THE KUBA-I-SABZ, KIRMAN  
From a photograph by the Author





### *Marco Polo traverses Asia to the Persian Gulf*

go there to buy the goods that come from foreign lands'. There is evidence to show that, after the fall of Baghdad, the trade route changed to the north through Tabriz and reached the Black Sea at Trebizond, instead of making for a port on the Mediterranean. Pegolitti, who wrote a commercial guide in the following century, never even mentions Baghdad as a trade centre.

From Tabriz, Marco then followed the main caravan route running eastwards to Kazvin, but he mentions no city until he reaches Sava. There he accepts its erroneous identification with the Sheba, or Saba, of the Prophet Isaiah<sup>1</sup> as the city 'whence the three Magi set out when they came to adore Jesus Christ. In the city there are three very large and most beautiful tombs, in which the three Magi are buried.' Three stages further on, 'he found a town called Cala Ataperistan which, in our language, means the town of the Fire-Worshippers'. On this name, which actually refers to the Zoroastrians who are still termed *Atashparastan*, or 'Fire worshippers', in Persia, Marco weaves a delightful legend in which 'three kings of that country' take the place of the three Magi at Sava.

Marco now writes: 'Know, then, that Persia—for it is a very large country—contains eight kingdoms; I will tell you their names one by one. The first, one reaches when coming from Toris, is called Casvin [Kazvin]; the second, lying to the south, is called Curdistan [Kurdistan]; the third, Lor [Luristan]; the fourth, Sulistan; the fifth, Isfaan [Ispahan]; the sixth, Serazi [Shiraz]; the seventh, Soncara; the eighth, which is at

<sup>1</sup> 'The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the Lord' (Isaiah lx, 6).

## *The Quest for Cathay*

the extremity of Persia, Tunocain. All these kingdoms lie towards the south, except one, Tunocain, which is near the region of the *Arbre Sol*.' Marco follows the custom of the period in giving the names of the cities or tribes to the various provinces. Sulistan, the country of the Shuls, may be identified with the Mamaseni Lurs, who occupy the country between Shiraz and Luristan, and are descendants of the Shul. Then follow Isfahan and Shiraz, the latter being the capital of Fars, the homeland of the Persians. Soncara or Shabankara occupied the country round the salt lake of Niriz. The capital, Ik, situated to the north-west of Darab, was captured by Hulaku Khan in 1259. Finally we have Tunocain, the province of Kuhistan, which Marco refers to again in the next chapter. Baber uses the same term for the district, which forms part of the great eastern province of Khorasan. No mention is made in this incomplete list of the province of Kirman, while the claims of Yezd, which is considered to be a province to-day, are ignored.

To resume, Marco undoubtedly passed through Kashan (although he merely refers to it as being the home of the three Kings), and reached Yezd by the main caravan route, along which I have travelled more than once. He mentions the silk cloths of Yezd, and from this city he gives the first description of the route he followed in his onward journey to Kirman and Hormuz. He writes: 'When one leaves this region to journey further, one travels for seven days over plains, passing only three inhabited places. . . . There are many fine palm-groves, which one can ride through. . . . There are also very fine wild asses.'

The present main route between Yezd and Kirman runs



## *Marco Polo traverses Asia to the Persian Gulf*

via Anar and Bahramabad at a general altitude of five thousand feet, which is much too high for date-palms. But travelling by a parallel western route, at Bafk, situated at three thousand feet, I found extensive palm groves while northwards stretched a vast salt swamp, the habitat of the wild ass.

Of Kirman he writes that 'the Tartar sent a sovereign of his own choice'. When I founded the British Consulate at this remote city in 1895, I found in its most conspicuous building, termed *Kuba-i-Sabz*, or 'Green Dome', an inscription dated A.H. 640 (1242). This building contained the tombs of the Kara Khitai dynasty of Kirman. At the time of Marco's journeys, Turkan *Khâtun*, a most capable woman, ruled the province,<sup>1</sup> to which her husband had been appointed by the Tartar *Khákan*.

Marco writes: 'The women and girls do exquisite needle-work in silks of all colours, embroidering it with beasts, and birds and other figures'. It is of especial interest to note that, apart from those embroideries, the shawls of Kashmir were originally copied from the *shal* of Kirman. Marco also refers to the swiftness of the falcons of the country, with which I have enjoyed much good sport.

'On leaving Kirman', Marco continues, 'one rides seven days over a plain . . . and one reaches a very great mountain. After that begins a great descent and for two days one continues going down. . . . During the winter, it is so cold from the city of Kirman to this descent that one can hardly survive by wearing many clothes and furs. . . . After the two days' descent of which I have told you, one comes to a very vast plain, at the beginning of which stands a city called Camadi.' In 1895, and

<sup>1</sup> Vide Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, pp. 60-61.



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again later, I made tours in order to trace the Polos' route, which lay in part across unexplored country. It appears to be important first of all to identify Camadi. In a *History of the Seljaks of Kirman*, Komadin, as it was called, is described as 'the abode of men from every quarter, and the storehouse of the treasures of Cathay, and Hindustan, Abyssinia, Zanzibar, Turkey and Egypt. . . .' In 1894 I examined the site spread over an extensive area on the right bank of the Halil Rud. The important ruined fort was protected by a ditch, measuring two hundred and eighty-six yards on each side: I also made a collection of seals and coins. Marco describes it as 'erstwhile wonderfully noble and great, but which now is such no longer, for the Tartar invaders have sacked it several times'.

This deserted city is locally termed *Shahr-i-Daqianus*, or the city of Decius, and the traveller is told the legend of the persecuting tyrant of the seven sleepers. A similar name and legend is attached to ruins in distant Chinese Turkestan.

During my exploration of the country to the south of Kirman, part of which was a blank on the map, I found that south of Rayin lay the elevated valley of Sárdu which was surrounded by very high mountains. It runs up to the Sarbizan Pass, which rises to 9200 feet, whence a very steep descent led to Dildard and so to Marco's Camadi. Here, then, we have the bitterly cold country of Sárdu, the very great mountain and the great descent to Camadi. This section of the route may now be considered to be finally and satisfactorily settled.

Continuing his account, Marco states that the region of Reobarles, or Rudbar, 'produces dates, apples of Paradise, pistachios, and other fruit that we do not possess in our cold countries'. Owing to its fertility, and still more 'because all the

### *Marco Polo traverses Asia to the Persian Gulf*

merchants who go to Cormos [Hormuz] for the purpose of trading . . . send their mules and camels during the winter to the plains of Reobar, in order to fatten them on the abundant grass', it served as a favourite raiding-ground for the Caraunas, of whose activities Marco gives a remarkably accurate contemporary account. 'Their King is called Nogodar [Nigudar]. . . . Leaving his uncle, Chagatai, who was then in Greater Armenia, he fled with ten thousand of his men, most cruel and ribald fellows; he passed through Balashan [Badakhshan], then through a province called Pashai, and then through another called Keshimur [Kashmir], where he lost many of his men and animals, because the roads were narrow and bad. Once they had passed through all these provinces, they entered India from the direction of a province called Dilivar. They captured a noble city, also called Dilivar, where Nogodar settled, taking the sovereignty away from a king called Asidin Soldan. . . . His men, who were Tartars, and hence white, mixed with the Indian women, who were black, and begot children who were called Caraunas. . . . On their plundering forays they ride sometimes thirty and sometimes forty days, but for the most part they resort to the region of Reobar.'

Thanks mainly to the research of Sir Aurel Stein, to whom I am greatly indebted, we learn that these raids took place during the reign of Ghiasuddin, the Asidin of our traveller. Nogodar's route from Badakhshan lay through the Bashgal Valley, and the mention of Pashai as a province proves that the pagan Kafirs—the Pashai—were a leading Kafir tribe who at that period occupied territories to the south-east as far as the Kunar River. Thence the route ran through Swat, Buner, Agror (the Ariora of Yule's edition) and up the Jhelum valley to



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Kashmir. Stein considers that Nogodar lost his men and horses in the difficult passes of the Jhelum valley. Dilivar is a misunderstanding for Cetta di Livar, or City of Lahawar (Lahore), the capital of the Punjab. Stein concludes his masterly article<sup>1</sup> on the subject by remarking that in this exact account of a raid extending over half Asia, we have proofs that Marco had written careful notes during his journeys.

In 1897 a British superintendent of the Indo-European Telegraph Department was murdered in Persian Baluchistan by a tribe known as the Karwanis, and I have sometimes wondered whether they were the descendants of Marco's Caraunas.

To return to the travellers: 'Messer Marco Polo himself was almost caught by these people . . . but he made his escape to a town called Canosalmi. Of his companions many were taken and sold, and some were killed.' There is some doubt about the exact site of this village, but 'Cano' is almost certainly 'Khan' or 'stream', and the word closely resembles the Salmous of Diodorus Siculus, where Alexander welcomed Nearchus, albeit Diodorus erroneously places it on the sea coast. If we accept this identification, Marco Polo crossed the route of his mighty predecessor at this point.<sup>1</sup>

The first abrupt descent from the Iranian plateau was by the Sarbizan Pass, and beyond Canosalmi 'one reaches another descent, and for the space of twenty miles one must continue going down. The road is exceedingly bad and infested by robbers.' When travelling along this route I overtook a caravan which had been attacked by Bashakirdi robbers. Tea was scattered about, for which the primitive bandits had no use, and the camelmen were burying one of their number who had

<sup>1</sup> *Journal R.G.S.* vol. liv, p. 92.



## *Marco Polo traverses Asia to the Persian Gulf*

been killed. Indeed the charming river, fringed by palm groves, is known as *Rudkhana-i-Duzdi*, or 'The River of Robbery'.

To quote again: 'When one reaches the bottom of this descent, one finds another very beautiful plain, called the plain of Cormos. It stretches for two days' journey. There are fine rivers, with plenty of dates and other fruit. . . . On the shore there is a city called Cormos, which possesses a harbour. You must know that here arrive the traders from India with their ships, bringing all kinds of spices, precious stones, pearls, gold and silk cloths, elephants' teeth, and many other wares.' This, then, was medieval Hormuz, the successor of the Hormozeia where Nearchus beached his ships in the river Anamis, now termed the Minab River. Not many years later, about A.D. 1300 probably, owing to an attack by a Chagatay prince, Kutlugh Shah, in 1299, the merchants decided to seek a safer home first on Kishm, and finally on the island of Jerun, where New Hormuz, celebrated by Milton in the motto to this chapter, was built. When I first landed on this island, where the splendid Portuguese fort remains almost intact,<sup>1</sup> I marvelled at the choice of a site lacking fresh water and vegetation for such an important emporium. Probably the difficulties that would be experienced by an invading host decided the choice.

Marco Polo concludes his account of Hormuz with a story of how an army was destroyed by the heat in that neighbourhood, but Abdur Razzak, the envoy of Shah Rukh, surpassed him when he wrote:

Soon as the sun shone forth from the height of heaven,  
The heart of stone grew hot beneath its orb;  
The bodies of the fishes, at the bottom of the fish-ponds,

<sup>1</sup> *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, ch. xxv.

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Burned like the silk which is exposed to the fire;  
Both the water and the air gave out so burning a heat,  
That the fish swam away to take refuge in the fire.  
In the plains the chase became a matter of perfect ease,  
For the desert was filled with roasted gazelles.







IN THE KASHGAR OASIS  
From a photograph by the Author

CHAPTER XI

MARCO POLO CROSSES THE PAMIRS TO CATHAY

Do you know the world's white roof-tree—do you know that windy rift  
Where the baffling mountain eddies chop and change?  
Do you know the long day's patience, belly-down on frozen drift  
While the head of heads is feeding out of range?  
It is there that I am going, where the boulders and the snow lie,  
With a trusty, nimble tracker that I know,  
I have sworn an oath, to keep it on the Horns of *Ovis Poli*,  
And the Red Gods call me out and I must go!

RUDYARD KIPLING

The Ocean turns northward along the east of China, and then expands in  
the same direction till it passes China, and comes opposite to the Rampart  
of Yajuj and Majuj.

ABULFEDA



## CHAPTER XI

### MARCO POLO CROSSES THE PAMIRS TO CATHAY

MARCO POLO was not pleased with the vessels he saw at Hormuz: 'Their ships are very bad, and many of them are wrecked, because they are not put together with iron nails, but sewn with twine made from the husk of Indian nuts. . . . It is hence a matter of no little peril to sail in those ships.'

It is interesting to note that the great Moslem traveller, Ibn Battuta, expressed an opposite opinion, and pointed out that the use of fibre for fastening together the planks of a ship gave a certain resilience and prevented ships from falling to pieces when a reef was struck. They must, however, one would imagine, require constant repairs. In all probability the Polos, who reached Hormuz in the winter when the sailing season had not commenced, considered the dangers of a sea voyage were even greater than those of a land journey, and decided to travel across Asia entirely by land.

Kirman, once again, was the immediate goal, and mention is made of a route with many hot baths. Actually there are two routes, on both of which sulphur springs are found. I have travelled along them both, and from the description given there is little to choose between them. But the most direct route ran almost due north through Baft to Kirman, and this was probably the one that was followed.

Between Kirman and the province of Khorasan lay the great central desert of Persia, and before giving the experiences of Marco, a brief description of it seems to be desirable. The

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general term for this desolate area is Lut, the Arabic form of the Patriarch Lot. In various parts of the sinister waste, guides point out the ruins of ancient 'cities of Lot' which were destroyed with fire by the Almighty. Upon inspection, these so-called 'cities' are seen to be but bluffs worn and fretted by the action of the fierce winds and rain until they, to quote Sir Walter Scott:

Form'd turret, dome, and battlement,  
Or seemed fantastically set,  
With cupola and minaret.

I have seen similar formations of considerable beauty in the Grand Canyon of Colorado. Incidentally it is of interest to note that the Arabs term the Dead Sea *Bahr-i-Lut*, or 'Sea of Lot', and no doubt the desert is named after the nephew of Abraham. This sinister waste, which I have crossed more than once, constitutes the 'Dead Heart' of Persia, with its immense gravel-slopes, occasional salt lakes and vast expanses of sandhills backed by black jagged ranges. As in its grim counterpart the Gobi, the route is marked by the skeletons of animals, while I have occasionally passed desiccated corpses of unfortunate wayfarers. Lack of water causes many to fall by the way, and the dreaded simoom, or 'poison wind', wipes out entire caravans.

To return to our travellers: 'On leaving the city of Kirman, one has seven days of most wearisome riding; and I will tell you why. During the first three days one finds no water, or practically none, and what one does find is brackish and as green as meadow grass, and so bitter that no one could possibly drink it. . . . On the fourth day, one reaches a fresh-water river flowing underground. . . . At the end of these seven days one finds the city of Cobinan.' Marco undoubtedly travelled *via* Zarand,







A HALT ON THE PAMIRS  
From a photograph by the Author

## *Marco Polo crosses the Pamirs to Cathay*

the route by the flourishing town of Ravar not fitting in with the description. This village of Zarand, which I have visited, had probably been recently ruined by the destructive Ghazz tribe, but its *Kanat*, or 'fresh water river flowing underground', was evidently still in existence. The whole area is permeated with salt.

Kuhbanan, or 'The Hill of the Wild Pistachio Tree', is mentioned for its manufacture of 'tutia which is very good for the eyes', and, when I was living at Kirman, the manufacture of this preparation of oxide of zinc was still continued. To quote a Persian proverb: 'The dust of a flock of sheep is *tutia* to the eyes of a hungry wolf'.

'On leaving this city of Cobinan', Marco continues, 'one rides no less than eight days across a very arid desert, without fruits or trees, and with water as bitter and bad as in the other section. . . . At the end of eight days one comes to a province called Tunocain.'

About this section of the journey there has been some divergence of opinion, but I read in a native chronicle that the famous Seljuk monarch, Alp Arslan, marched from Kirman to Khorasan by this route, and nearly lost his army from thirst between Kuhbanan and Tabbas.<sup>1</sup> Apart from this weighty evidence, the alternative route possesses sweet running water at Naiband and at Duhuk, and may thus be ruled out, while the distance from Kuhbanan to Tabbas is 150 miles or eight long desert stages, whereas to Tun is 205 miles. Thus we may accept that Marco travelled to Tabbas and thence to Tun.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> For this campaign vide *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> I would state that it was mainly the reference to Alp Arslan's campaign which made me finally accept the Tabbas route.



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district was referred to as Tun-va-Tabbas, and 'Go to Tun and Tabbas!' was an impolite remark. Shah Riza has, presumably for this reason, changed the name of Tun to Firdaus, which signifies Paradise!

Marco here pauses to tell the story of the 'Old Man of the Mountain' and his Assassins, whose earthly paradise and sinister activities are described in Chapter VI. Probably he refers to them in connexion with Tun, since Hulaku Khan had inaugurated his campaign for the extirpation of the Ismaili sect in Iran by the capture of Khaf and Tun some fifteen years previously. As previously stated, Prince Edward of England was wounded by a *fidai* of the Syrian branch of the Assassins at Acre in this very year (1272).

From Tun, instead of visiting the province of Kain, which lay out of his course, Marco probably took the direct route across the Band-i-Turkestan, as the range is termed, to Sapurgan or Shiburghan, where he praises the melons. He does not mention Herat, which lay on his route in the fertile valley of the Hari Rud, probably because it had been utterly destroyed by the Mongols,<sup>1</sup> which was also the fate of other cities in this area. Farther east lay Balkh, of which he writes: 'Balc is a great and noble city, but once it was still more noble and great, for the Tartars and other peoples have ravaged and destroyed it'. Balkh, the classical Bactra, indeed suffered terribly from the Mongols. Continuing the journey, 'one rides for as many as twelve days between north-east and east without coming across a single dwelling, for the inhabitants have all taken refuge

<sup>1</sup> Vide Sykes, *History of Persia* (3rd ed.), ii, 82, for the almost incredible destruction wrought by the Mongols, who wished to nomadise all the countries which they conquered, and to leave no cities that might threaten their lines of communication.



### *Marco Polo crosses the Pamirs to Cathay*

among the mountains, in fortresses, on account of brigands and armies that cruelly harassed them'. Taican (Talikan) is noted as being famous for its salt: 'and I can assure you there is so much of it that the whole world would have enough till the Day of Doom'. From Taican to Scasem (Kishm) is three days, and another three days 'without finding habitations or anything to eat or drink' brought the Polos to Badakhshan, where, owing to Marco's illness, a stay of several months was necessary. 'Balashan', he writes, 'is a great province, whose inhabitants worship Mahomet. . . . The royal line descends from King Alexander and the daughter of Darius, the great Lord of Persia. In memory of the great Alexander, all their kings still call themselves . . . Zulcarnein.'

This last sentence raises an interesting question. Alexander the Great, as we know, visited the temple of Zeus-Ammon, situated in the Siwah Oasis. The priests of the god assured him that he was in truth the son of the god and Alexander thenceforth occasionally wore a pair of horns. This appealed to the imagination of Asia, and by his title Zulkarnain, or 'Lord of the Two Horns', he is known throughout the Near and Middle East. It is interesting to note that, in 1897, the defeat of the Greeks by the Sultan led to the murder of the British telegraph superintendent in Persian Baluchistan, referred to in the previous chapter. The connexion between the two events may not seem obvious, but the rude tribesmen, hearing that the Sultan had defeated the nation of *Zulkarnain*, decided to celebrate the occasion by the murder of a Christian.

Among the feats of Alexander in Central Asia was the capture of the Sogdian Rock. The prisoners included Roxana, the beautiful daughter of Oxyartes, the Bactrian chief, whom

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the victor married. He also married Statira, a daughter of the unfortunate Darius Codomannus.

Owing to its strategical importance, the Macedonians held Bactria in force, and in 256 B.C. it became an independent kingdom under its Governor, Diodorus, who threw off his allegiance to the Seleucid Empire. There is undoubtedly a Macedonian strain in the upper classes of Badakhshan, and the claim of descent from Alexander is made not only by Badakhshan families but by the rulers of remote Hunza who intermarried with Badakhshan women.

Marco as a jeweller revelled in the 'precious stones called *Balas* rubies, which are so beautiful and of such great value.' Did not Chaucer, in the 'Court of Love', write—

No sapphire in Inde, no Rubies rich of price,  
There lacked than, nor Emeraud so grene,  
*Balès*, Turkès,<sup>1</sup> ne thing to my device.

Marco also refers to 'the finest and best azure in the world'. The mines of Lajwurd (whence the words *l'Azur* and *Lazuli* are derived) are still worked, and a large piece of this beautiful *lapis lazuli* was once brought to me for sale at Kashgar.

Marco held Badakhshan in great esteem, for 'when he was in those regions, in fact, he lay ill for about a year, but as soon as he took the advice of going to the mountains, he recovered'. He ends his description of Badakhshan with a reference to the great ladies who 'for a pair of trousers, or rather drawers, use as much as sixty, eighty or one hundred ells of cotton cloth, which they pleat. This they do to make their buttocks appear big, for their men delight in fat women.'

'On leaving Balashan, one journeys twelve days between

<sup>1</sup> A Turkès is the turquoise, or 'Turkish stone'.







THE GREAT WALL NEAR THE NAN K'OU PASS  
From Oswald Siren's *History of Early Chinese Art*, Ernest Benn, Ltd.

### *Marco Polo crosses the Pamirs to Cathay*

east and north-east along a great river . . . and reaches a fairly small province called Vocan.' In this section Marco follows up the Oxus, locally known as the Panja, and, as Stein points out, the reckoning is correct from Baharak, the old capital, to Kala Panja, the chief place of Wakhan.<sup>1</sup>

'Leaving this region', says Marco, 'one travels three days to the north-east, always through mountains. One ascends so high that they say it is the highest place in the world. On reaching these heights, one finds a plain between the mountains, with a great lake, whence issues a very fine river. . . . There is also an enormous number of wild sheep, of very great size. Their horns reach a length of quite six spans. . . . To cross this plain one rides no less than twelve days. It is called Pamier. . . . And I tell you that, on account of this great cold, fire does not burn so clearly, nor is it of the same colour as elsewhere, and it cooks food less well.'

Here our author undoubtedly refers to the Sir-i-Kul Lake, while the river is, of course, the Oxus. Wood, who reached this lake (which he named Victoria Lake) in 1838, mentioned the native name of *Bam-u-Dunia*, or 'Roof of the World', which aptly describes these high-lying valleys. He also gave the altitude of the lake at 15,600 feet.<sup>2</sup> When travelling in the Pamirs, my sister and I were seldom below 13,000 feet, and sometimes at considerably higher altitudes. We also noted the impossibility of securing properly cooked food, while rapid movement was difficult.

Of especial interest to sportsmen is Marco's description of the great rams, of which Wood brought home specimens that were

<sup>1</sup> *Serindia*, vol. i, p. 65.    <sup>2</sup> Captain John Wood, *A Journey to the Source of the Oxus River*. The true Oxus is the Panja, the river flowing from the lake one of its tributaries.



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rightly called *Ovis Poli* in honour of the great Venetian traveller.<sup>1</sup> Here then, on the 'Roof of the World', Marco reaches the climax of his great journey across Asia. As mentioned in Chapter III, Ptolemy considered Mount Imaos to be the boundary between 'Inner Scythia' and unknown 'Outer Scythia'.

Marco left the Pamirs, probably by a pass which I had crossed, and reached Kashgar, travelling down the Gez River. Kashgar is the chief city of the vast plain known as Eastern Turkestan and in modern times as Sinkiang, or 'The New Province', and as Chinese Turkestan. It stretches for perhaps one thousand miles from east to west and for half that distance from north to south. Its physical boundaries to the west consist of the Kizil Art, holding up the Pamirs, while on the south side rise the formidable ranges of the Kurakoram, termed 'The Ridge-Pole of the World', and the Kuen Lun, the latter being the Kasia Mountains of Ptolemy, which bound Serindia, as he termed the country.

The Takla Makan desert occupies the centre of the great plain, which may best be described as a series of intensely desert areas, fringed by rich oases forming a horse-shoe, with the toe pointing west. These oases entirely depend on the irrigation water from the rivers issuing from the mighty mountain ranges, the rainfall being negligible.

Of the inhabitants of the Kashgar Oasis, Marco writes: 'They live by trade and handicrafts. They have splendid gardens and vineyards and fine farms. . . . There are a few Nestorian

<sup>1</sup> It may interest my readers to know that when I informed the late Rudyard Kipling that I had shot an *Ovis Poli* exactly 'where the boulders and the snow lie', he exclaimed: 'This is marvellous'.



### *Marco Polo crosses the Pamirs to Cathay*

Christians.' This oasis, watered by the Tuman Su, is most fertile, and to a traveller coming from the bare, treeless Pamirs seems to be an earthly Paradise. While resident there some twenty years ago, I attempted to find traces of Nestorian Christians, who had all disappeared. I was informed that when a dealer failed to sell a horse, he made the sign of the cross on its forehead to prevent its luck being spoilt for the next fair, and that this was the only surviving custom that was connected with the Nestorians.

From Kashgar, Marco skirted the Takla Makan desert to Yangi Hissar and Yarkand, where 'they mostly have goitres'. Sad to say, at the time of my visit to this very rich oasis, goitre was still terribly prevalent. From Yarkand, Marco travelled to Khotan, which is a corruption of Yu-tien, or 'Country of Jade'. This valuable stone is found in the dry beds of the Yurung-Kash and Kara-Kash, the rivers of Khotan, and is mentioned by Benedict Goes. I visited the diggers, who generally find the precious boulders some twelve feet down in the river-beds.

It struck me in reading Marco's description of this part of his journey that it was curious to find nothing about the great ranges. Actually, when following in his footsteps to Khotan, I never sighted them, owing to the perpetual haze caused by the presence of loess particles in the atmosphere. Indeed the ranges are only visible after the very rare rainstorms. The Heart of Asia is very barren and dry land.

Continuing the journey from Khotan, Pem is next mentioned, which Stein<sup>1</sup> identifies with the ruined site of Uzun-tati. Like other sites where he made such important discoveries,

<sup>1</sup> *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks*, p. 70. In this chapter I am deeply indebted to Sir Aurel Stein's works.

## *The Quest for Cathay*

it was abandoned owing to the shrinkage of irrigation water from the mountains.

Marco describes the road from Pem to neighbouring Charchan as all one stretch of sand, and the grim Gobi, or Desert, is approached at Lop, after 'five days across the sand, finding bad and bitter water'. At Lop (the modern Charklik), 'travellers who wish to cross the Great Desert take a week's rest in order to refresh themselves and their animals. At the end of the week, they take with them food for a month for man and beast and, leaving the city, enter the desert. You must know, too, that this desert is said to be so long that it takes a year to cross it from one end to the other, but where the width is least, it is a month's journey. And across the desert one must always ride a day and a night to find water. In all there are about twenty-eight places with water. . . . There are neither beasts nor birds, for they find nothing to eat. But you must know that even such a marvel is to be found there as I shall tell you of. Know then, that when one travels by night across this desert, if anyone happens, through falling asleep or through any other cause, to remain behind or leave his companions, then, when he wishes to rejoin them, he hears spirits speaking to him as if they were his companions, for sometimes they even call him by name. And often a traveller is thus led astray, and never found again, so that many have died or disappeared in this way.' It is interesting to note that Hsuan-tsang, the celebrated Chinese traveller, whose journey is described in Chapter II, wrote: 'The view was boundless, and in the night the demons and goblins raised fire-lights as numerous as the stars'.

Cathay was reached 'at a city called Sachiū'. Marco mentions that 'they have many abbeys and monasteries, all of which are



### *Marco Polo crosses the Pamirs to Cathay*

full of all kinds of idols, to which they offer great sacrifices, and pay great honour and worship'. Sachiü (Sha-chou) is now termed Tun-huang. It is the site of the caves of the Thousand Buddhas to which Marco refers, and the scene of Stein's amazing find of manuscripts, dating from the fifth to the close of the tenth century A.D., together with a quantity of paintings and embroideries, some of which possess considerable artistic beauty.

From Tung-huang Marco takes us back to the north side of the Gobi to Camul (Hami) and to other provinces. The apparent reason for this digression was that he wished to embody information given him by the elder Polos. He first mentions Camul, now Hami, which was visited by the elder Polos and appears on the Catalan map. Westwards, we owe to Benedetto's literary discoveries a new chapter on Icoгурistan (Uighuristan) with its capital Carachoco (Kara-Khoja). Covering the modern province of Turfan, it was the homeland of the Uighurs, whose civilising influence on the Mongols is referred to in Chapter VIII. Marco writes: 'These idolaters are exceedingly learned, according to their own laws and customs, and constantly apply themselves to the liberal arts'. Turfan is situated to the west of Hami, but Ghinghintalas, which has been identified with the Barkul district, lies around Lake Barkul to the north and was famous for its 'salamander', as asbestos was termed in the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

To return to Tun-huang, the Polos travelled 'ten days between north-east and east' to Suh-chou, the route running along the ancient *limes* discovered by Stein, who writes: 'For centuries the passage through the still extant Great Wall, marked

<sup>1</sup> Yule, *op. cit.* i, p. 216.



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by an imposing fort, has been greeted by travellers coming from Central Asia, as the threshold of true Cathay'.<sup>1</sup>

The next city mentioned is Canpichu (Kan-chau), where the Polos lived for a year. Marco then makes a second digression to tell us of Ezina (Etzina), situated to the north of Kan-Chau with its ruined city of Kara-Khoto. And, referring to a journey he had made, he describes the forty days' march across the desert to Karakoram, the capital of Mongolia, which was described by Rubruquis.

After Karakoram we are told of the plain of Baikal: 'Its inhabitants are called Mecrit, and they are wild. They live by the chase. The most plentiful animals are stags; and I assure you they ride upon them. . . . The plain is bounded to the north by the Ocean.' Here we then have an account of the reindeer-riding Tungus.<sup>2</sup> 'In the islands round about that sea', he adds, 'gerfalcons breed. And I tell you in very truth that that place is so far to the North that the North Star is left somewhat behind to the South.'

Marco after this astounding statement, made from hearsay evidence, invites us to return to Kan-chau and, resuming the journey 'for five days through a region where many spirits can be heard speaking especially at night . . . one reaches, towards the east, a kingdom called Erguiul [Liang-chou]'. Eight more stages eastwards brought the travellers to Egrigaia (Ning-hsia) in the province of Kansu. Thence the route lay through the province of Tenduc (Tiente), 'which was the principal seat of Prester John, when he was Lord of the Tartars

<sup>1</sup> *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks*, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent account of this interesting tribe is given by E. L. Lindgren in the *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* for April 1935.

### *Marco Polo crosses the Pamirs to Cathay*

and of the other provinces and kingdoms round about. And to this day his descendants still live there. . . . And that is the place that in our country is known as Gog and Magog, but they call it Ung and Mungul. In each of these provinces there was a separate race; in Ung lived the Gogs and in Mungul the Tartars.' Marco and Corvino made a mistake in identifying George with Prester John's family. Pelliot points out that he belonged to another Christian tribe, the Onguts, who ruled over Teneduc,<sup>1</sup> but Marco's account perpetuated the legend of a Prester John in Central Asia.

To turn to another interesting question, here we surely have a reference to the Great Wall of China, more especially as the names must have been familiar to Marco, and so the subject merits a digression. In the book of Genesis,<sup>2</sup> Magog is reckoned among the sons of Japheth with Gomer and Madai and Javan, and Tubal and Meshech and Tiras. Again, in the book of Ezekiel<sup>3</sup> we read 'Son of Man, set thy face against Gog, the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against Him'; and in the following chapter we read of Gog's burial in Hamon-gog. Vaguely these tribes were, generally speaking, connected with the north-east end of the world (although Meshech was the port of Ophir), whence, in the Last Days, they would burst forth and devastate it.

Moslem writers, it is to be noted, were aware of the *Sadd Yajuj wa Majuj*, as they termed it. They also knew of the *Sadd-i-Iskandar*, or 'Barrier of Alexander', and located it at the Darband position on the west side of the Caspian, and when the Mongols broke into Europe, the site of the 'Barrier', based originally on a vague report of the Great Wall, was temporarily

<sup>1</sup> T'oung Pao, 1914, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis x, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel xxxviii and xxxix.



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changed to the Caucasus position. It is, however, to be noted that, in the famous Catalan map, Gog and Magog are shown located in the north-east corner of the world with the note: 'Nations shut up by Alexander of Macedon'. Further information is found in the statement of Abulfeda, which appears as the motto to the present chapter. To resume, when Kubilai heard of the approach of the Venetians, 'he sent messengers to meet them at the distance of forty days' journey'. They were now nearing their goal, and, after passing through Sindachu (Hsuan-hua-fu) and Chagannor, or 'The White Lake', they were received by Kubilai Khan at Chandu (Shang-tu). In this summer palace the Polos were given 'a joyful and hospitable welcome', and thus completed a great journey which had lasted 'no less than three and a half years'.





KUBILAI KHAN FLIES HIS EAGLE AT A HIND  
From *Livre des Merveilles*, Bibliothèque Nationale



CHAPTER XII

MARCO POLO TRAVELS TO YUNNAN AND BURMA



This Cambinskan, of which I have yow told,  
In royal vestiment sit on his deys,  
With diademe ful heighe in his paleys,  
And halt his feste, so solempne and so riche,  
That in this world ne was ther non it liche.

CHAUCER, 'The Squieres Tale'

## CHAPTER XII

### MARCO POLO TRAVELS TO YUNNAN AND BURMA

‘**W**HEN the Great Khan’, we are told, ‘saw Marco, who was a young man, he asked who he was.’ His father replied, ‘Sire, he is my son and your servant’, whereupon Kubilai said, ‘He is welcome’. Again we read: ‘Now it happened that Marco learned so well the customs, languages and manners of writing of the Tartars, that . . . not long after he had reached the Court of the Great Lord, he knew four languages, and their alphabets, and manner of writing’. He was thus duly qualified both to write about China and to serve Kubilai on important missions, not only in China, but even in distant ‘India’—a term which probably indicated Indo-China and the Malay Archipelago.

It is due to these qualifications that the descriptions he gives us of the various countries and provinces which he visited are of such inestimable value. His study of these countries was stimulated by Kubilai’s passion for hearing of the ‘novelties, customs and habits of foreign countries’. Consequently, he not only made a point of collecting information of interest, but ‘he further collected sundry wonderful things to present them to the Great Khan, who appreciated them greatly’. Masfield makes the charming remark that, ‘One feels the presence of Kubilai all through the narrative, as the red wine, dropped into the water-cup, suffuses all’.

Marco begins his account of the wonders of Cathay with a description of the summer palace at Shang-tu, or Chandu

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(the Xanadu of Coleridge): 'In this city Kubilai Khan had an immense palace made of marble and stone, with halls and rooms all gilt and adorned with figures of beasts and birds, and pictures of trees and flowers of different kinds. It is most wondrously beautiful and marvellously decorated. On one side it is bounded by the city-wall, and from that point another wall runs out enclosing a space of no less than sixteen miles, with numerous springs and rivers and meadows. And the Great *Khan* keeps all kinds of animals in it, namely stags and fallow-deer and roe-bucks.' This charming description was read by Coleridge, who fell asleep and dreamed:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree,  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.  
So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With towers and walls were girdled round:  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But the real capital was at Cambaluc.<sup>1</sup> Marco's description of the palace runs: 'It is the largest that ever was seen. . . . It has no upper floor, but the basement is ten palms higher than the ground surrounding it, and the roof is surpassingly high. Flush with the floor of the palace, there is a marble wall, running all round, two paces wide. The palace is built in the centre of the wall, so that the whole of the wall around is like a vestibule to the palace, round which one can walk, and from

<sup>1</sup> Cambaluc is a corruption of Khan-baliq, or 'City of the Khan', the Mongol name for Peking, or Peiping, as it is now called.





THE MARCO POLO BRIDGE, NEAR PEIPING  
From Oswald Siren's *History of Early Chinese Art*, Ernest Benn, Ltd.



### *Marco Polo travels to Yunnan and Burma*

which one can see outside. The outer edge of the wall holds up a fine pillared balcony, that one can look out of. On each side of the palace is a great marble staircase, which leads from the ground to the top of the marble wall, and by which one reaches the palace. The inside walls of the halls and rooms are all covered with gold and silver, and on them are painted beautiful pictures of ladies and knights and dragons and beasts and birds and divers other things. The ceiling is also made in such a way that one sees nothing else on it, but pictures and gold. The great hall is so vast and large that quite six thousand men could banquet there. There are so many rooms as to surpass all belief. The beauty and size of this palace are so great that no one on earth, who had the necessary skill, could have planned or built it better. The roof is varnished in vermilion, green, blue, yellow, and all other colours; and so well and cunningly is this done, that it glitters like crystal, and can be seen shining from a great way off all round.'

To quote again: 'On his birthday the Great Khan dresses in wondrous robes of beaten gold, and twelve thousand barons and knights also dress in the same colour and after the same fashion. But though their robes are of the same colour and fashion, yet they are not so costly; but all the same they are of silk and gold. And all of them have great golden belts. This raiment is given them by the Great Khan. And I assure you that some of these robes are adorned with precious stones and pearls to the value of 10,000 gold bezants. Robes of this value are not rare. And you must know that thirteen times a year does the Great Khan give rich robes to these twelve thousand barons and knights; and all these robes are similar to his own, and of great value. It is truly a wonderful thing, as you may see, and



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such as no other Lord in the world, but he, could possibly do or keep up.' It is interesting to note that in the 'Romaunt of the Rose' Chaucer writes of Mirth:

Ful yong he was, and mery of thought,  
And in samyt, with briddes wrought,  
And with gold beten fetisly,  
His body was clad ful richely.

On their New Year's Day the *Khákan* and all his subjects dressed in white robes, and, as in Persia, white was the auspicious colour. 'On that day more than a hundred thousand splendid horses are given to the Great *Khan*.' The number appears to be exaggerated, but in view of the enormous tracts in Asia that had been nomadised and utilised solely for horse- and cattle-breeding—sheep were not bred to any extent—the numbers of horses owned by the Mongols may well have run into millions. It was undoubtedly the age of the horse.

Of Cambaluc Marco writes: 'You must know that, counting those inside and those outside the city (namely in the suburbs which, as you know, are twelve, and very large, stretching beyond each of the twelve city-gates), the houses and inhabitants of Cambaluc amount to such an immense number, that it is not possible to count them. There are many more inhabitants in the suburbs than in the city, for in them dwell and lodge all the merchants and other such people who come for their business; and they come in great numbers, both because the Lord lives in the city, and because Cambaluc is such a good market that many merchants and others go there for their business. And I assure you that the suburbs have as fine houses and palaces as the city, if you except, of course, that of the Great Lord.'

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Enough has been quoted to prove the amazing wealth of the Mongol dynasty under Kubilai. We now come to the important question of currency: 'Know then that the Great Khan has money made as follows. He has the bark taken of a certain kind of tree, that is to say of the mulberry-tree, the leaves of which are eaten by silkworms; then he has the thin layer of skin that lies between the bark and the trunk, removed; and he has this shredded and pounded into a kind of paste, together with glue; this he then has rolled out into sheets, something like paper, which are completely black. When the sheets are ready he has them cut up into pieces of different sizes, but all of a rectangular shape, of greater length than breadth. . . . And all these sheets bear the Great Lord's seal.'<sup>1</sup> Yule points out that the issue of paper money in China was at least as old as the beginning of the ninth century A.D. and that the Mongols issued paper money before the dynasty settled in China. It is remarkable that Marco never refers to the art of printing, although, as Yule puts it, the subject seems absolutely to challenge its description.<sup>2</sup>

I have recently been privileged to inspect a Latin edition of Marco Polo's great work at the Columbian Library of Seville.<sup>3</sup> It was the private copy of Columbus and is enriched by frequent annotations in his own handwriting of considerable interest, which I shall mention and sometimes quote. They reveal, as indeed Columbus proves time and again in his letters, that he laboured under the mistaken belief that the *Khákan* or Great Khan was

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that I saw paper being manufactured from mulberry-tree pulp at Khotan.

<sup>2</sup> Yule (Cordier edition), Introduction, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> The valuable annotations are published in *Raccolta di Documenti et Studii. Reale Commissione Columbana*, Rome, 1893.



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still ruling in Cathay, whereas both the dynasty and the name for the country had disappeared. Yet, to give a single instance, he firmly believed that Cuba was Chipangu or Japan, and that the natives of Guanahani were undoubtedly at war with the Great Khan. To resume, in the chapter on Cambalu Columbus mentions the purchase by the *Khákan* of gold and jewels in return for notes. Marco notices the care that the *Khákan* took in having trees planted on both sides of the high roads with their post-houses. 'In sandy and desert tracks and on rocky mountains, where it would be impossible, he has stone cairns and pillars set up to show the way.' He also refers to a 'kind of stone that burns like wood. You must know that all over the province of Cathay there is a kind of black stone, which is dug out of the mountains like any other kind of stone, and burns like wood. These stones make no flame, except a little at the beginning when they are lit, like charcoal, and by merely remaining red-hot they give out great heat. They keep alight better than wood. If you put them into the fire at night and kindle them well, I assure you that they remain alight all night, so that you will still find the fire burning in the morning. And you must know that these stones are burnt all over the province of Cathay.' Coal was apparently unknown to Marco and he would hardly be aware that it was burned by the Roman legionaries in Britain. Columbus comments on this subject: *Lapides que ardent*.

So much, then, for the wonders of the court of Kubilai Khan. Marco now starts on his journeys in China and we read: 'You must know, then, that the Great Lord sent Messer Marco, the author of this book, as an envoy into the parts lying to the West'. The fact that Marco was not a traveller who merely



### *Marco Polo travels to Yunnan and Burma*

once passed along the routes he describes, but during many years went on mission after mission in various parts of China, explains away any minor difficulties that may be experienced in tracing the exact routes he followed. Also, there were obviously summer routes and winter routes, varying in accordance with the height of the rivers, the snowfall and other circumstances.

Leaving Cambaluc on this important mission, in his first stage Marco reaches a river, the San-Kan, which he terms Pulsanghin. Its stone bridge—the finest in the world and without equal—is ‘300 paces long and eight paces broad. . . . It has twenty-four arches . . . and along each side there is a parapet of marble slabs. At the beginning of the bridge, there stands a very large and tall column, resting upon a marble tortoise, with a big marble lion at the foot, another very beautiful lion big and well made, lies on the top of the column.’

Thirty miles beyond the bridge ‘one comes to a city called Jonju [Cho-chou]. It contains many monasteries of the idolaters. Beautiful gold and silver cloths and very fine sendals<sup>1</sup> are made there.’ To continue: ‘one mile out of Jonju, one finds two roads, one leading to the west, and the other to the south-east. The westerly road is that of Cathay, the other towards the great province of Manji.’<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sendal, a thin silk texture, was much esteemed in medieval Europe, the oriflamme of France being made of it. And did not Chaucer in his ‘Doctor of Physic’ write?—

‘In sanguin and in perse clad was alle  
Lined with taffata and with sendalle.’

<sup>2</sup> Manji, or Manzi, is South China, conquered by Kubilai from the Sung dynasty. Moslem poets, Firdausi, for example, refer to Chin and Machin, or Cathay and Manji. The men of Northern China used *Manji*, or ‘Sons of Barbarians’, in contempt, while the southerners, in return, termed the men of the north *Petai*, or ‘Fools of the North’.

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Following the western highway Marco traverses an extremely rich, densely populated area, to Tai-yuan fu, which he notes as being the only district in Cathay that produces wine. Perhaps Chang kien, who introduced the vine from Ferghana into China about 110 B.C., taught the making of wine to the inhabitants of this city. From Tai-yuan fu 'one rides towards the west for seven days through a most beautiful region to Pianfu [Ping-yung fu]'. Marco then takes us to Caichu, the home of the celebrated Golden King, who was, according to the romantic story, served only by beautiful girls, and was betrayed into the hands of Prester John. For two years the unfortunate Golden King was put to mind the cattle, 'but upon acknowledging the suzerainty of his captor, he was sent back to his kingdom'.<sup>1</sup>

Marco admired the Hoang-ho, or 'Yellow River', which he knew by the Mongol name of Karamoran, or 'Black River'. He mentions that 'no bridge can span it; for truly it is very broad and deep and swift'. A constant source of danger owing to its devastating floods, it was termed by an emperor 'from the remotest ages my country's sorrow'.

Continuing to pass through districts fertile and prosperous with ginger, silk and pheasants, as annotated by Columbus, Marco reaches 'the great thriving city of Kenjanfu', the capital of Shansi. 'The city is thriving with trade and handicrafts. They have great quantities of silk. Gold and silver cloths of all kinds are made there.' The province was ruled from a magnificent palace by Mangalai, the third son of Kubilai. This city, better known as Singan fu, was once the capital of the great

<sup>1</sup> Altun Khan was the king of the Kin or 'Golden' dynasty referred to on page 81.



### *Marco Polo travels to Yunnan and Burma*

Han dynasty: and in it was discovered the celebrated Nestorian monument referred to in Chapter IV.

Upon leaving it Marco travelled for three days across a fair plain. This was succeeded by a twenty days' ride through mountains and valleys and forests belonging to the province of Cuncan (Han-chung), which brought the tireless Venetian to Acbaluc, 'the white city on the frontier of Manji'. The annotation of Columbus here runs: *muscatum, furmentum, resum*.<sup>1</sup> Travelling ever westwards, Sindu fu (Chentu fu), then as now the capital of Szechuan, was visited. Here Marco first admired the Kiansui or Upper Yangtse, 'which flows into the Ocean Sea, at a distance of some 80 or 100 days' journey. Along this river stand many cities and towns. There is great shipping on it, I mean an immense multitude of ships, such a number as no one who has not seen them, could ever credit. The amount and quantity of great merchandise that traders carry up and down this river is also so vast, that no one, who has not seen it, could possibly believe it. So big is the river, that you would rather think it a sea than a river.' *Naves et merces innumere*, is the comment of Columbus.

Marco now enters Tibet and writes: 'Tibet is an immensely large province, with a language of its own. . . . It is so vast a province that it contains eight kingdoms. . . . They are a barbarous people. They have very large mastiffs, as big as donkeys.' When travelling in Lesser Tibet I was warned never to approach an encampment without calling out. When this was done the dogs were held, and not until then was it safe to approach. The travellers rode for twenty days through uninhabited country which was infested by 'many fierce and

<sup>1</sup> Musk, wheat, rice.



## *The Quest for Cathay*

cruel wild beasts, that are so dangerous and terrible'. This wild area ended in a region with small towns and villages, where on the customs of its girls Marco makes the comment, 'that is a fine country for young men from sixteen to twenty-four to go to'. Columbus also comments on the fact that virgins were not sought in marriage. Marco mentions that amber and coral find a ready market. As regards coral, I took several strings of it to be distributed as gifts when I travelled in the Pamirs, so wide-spread is the favour it finds in countries situated in these uplands far remote from the sea.

On quitting the province of Tibet we have a more fertile province in Gaiindu (Chiung-tu), where salt—'the pieces are as big as a two-penny loaf'—serves as money. It is bounded by the Brius, which Marco did not realise was the Upper Yangtse.

He now entered the wide-spreading province of Carajan, or Yunnan, 'which comprises no less than seven kingdoms'. The capital, Yachi (Yunnan fu), is noted as containing 'different kinds of people: some of them worship Mahomet, others are idolaters, and a few more are Nestorian Christians'.

One of the most striking passages in the book is Marco's reaction to the crocodile: 'In this province there are great snakes or serpents of such immeasurable size as to strike you dumb; and they are truly hideous, both to look upon and to hear of. I will tell you how big and long they are. Know, then, that in very truth there are some ten paces long, as big as a large cask, for they have a girth of some ten palms. These are the biggest. In front, near the head, they have two short legs, without feet, but furnished with three claws, one large and two small, like those of falcons and lions. They have a

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very big head, and eyes larger than a big loaf; their mouth is so big, that they can swallow a man whole; their teeth are enormous. They are so immeasurably large and fierce, that there is no man or beast that does not fear them; all are terrified by them.' Mentioning that large numbers of horses are bred in the province, Marco remarks: 'You must also know that the people of this province ride with long stirrups like Frenchmen'. Another very interesting observation runs: 'If it happened that a handsome and noble man, or any other person who had a fine shadow, came to lodge in the house of a man of this province, they killed him at night with poison or with some other means . . . because they thought that his fine shadow and his good graces, as well as his wisdom and his soul, remained in the house'. This disagreeable compliment was paid in many parts of the world. Cases have been reported on the Volga and on the North-West Frontier of India. Even in Europe we have Southey's 'St. Romuald':

'But', quoth the Traveller, 'wherefore did he leave  
A flock that knew his saintly worth so well?'

'Why, Sir,' the Host replied,  
'We thought perhaps that he might one day leave us;  
And then should strangers have  
The good man's grave,  
A loss like that would naturally grieve us;

'For he'll be made a saint of to be sure,  
Therefore we thought it prudent to secure  
His relics while we might;  
And so we meant to strangle him one night.'

Continuing his exploration, Marco reaches the province of Zardandan,<sup>1</sup> with its capital of Vochan, or Yung-chang fu,

<sup>1</sup> This is a Persian word signifying 'Gold Teeth'.



## The Quest for Cathay

where 'they make a gold case, fitted to their teeth, and cover both the upper and lower ones'—a fact which Columbus also annotated. Here Marco describes tattooing in some detail. He also refers to the eccentric custom of the *couvade*. To quote from the *Luciniade*:<sup>1</sup>

En Amérique, en Corse, et chez l'Iberien,  
En France, même encore chez le Venarnien,  
Au pays Navarrois, lorsqu'une femme accouche,  
L'épouse sort du lit et le mari se couche.

Marco now breaks off the narrative of his journey to give an account of the battle fought between the Mongols and the King of Mien (Burma) and Bangala (Bengal), which he witnessed in 1278. The Burmese army advanced into Yunnan to attack the invaders with a force composed of two thousand elephants, carrying wooden towers each held by twelve archers, supported by a large force of horsemen. The Mongols, some 12,000 horsemen, took up their position in a place with a thick forest close by. Their horses would not face the elephants: so they tied them up and discharged their arrows with such effect that the elephants 'turned in flight towards the king's men, and with such fury that the whole world seemed to be collapsing. . . . When the Tartars saw that the enemy had turned tail, they hewed them down, and gave chase, slaying them so mercilessly that truly it was a pitiful sight to see.'

After describing this historical battle Marco resumes the narrative of his journey 'On leaving this province one begins to go down a great descent. And you must know that one

<sup>1</sup> Yule, in vol. ii, p. 91, gives most interesting notes on this custom. I owe to him the above quotation from a poem by Sacombe, published in 1790. A recent traveller in Corsica mentions that the custom of *couvade* still prevails in the island.



## *Marco Polo travels to Yunnan and Burma*

rides no less than two and a half days constantly downhill . . . and reaches a province towards the south, on the borders of India, called Mien. One travels fifteen days through difficult country and great forests, where there are elephants and unicorns in vast numbers.' At Mien (Tagaung), situated on the Irrawaddy above Mandalay near the ruins of Old Pagan, Marco describes a tomb 'with two stone towers covered, the one with gold, and the other with silver. . . . The upper part was round, and hung all about with gilt bells, which tinkled every time the wind blew among them.' This, then, was the limit of Marco's journey, for he clearly did not visit Bangala, albeit he refers to its cottons and precious spices. Columbus annotates: *Bombiam copia, zinz iber, zucurum elephantis, specie.*<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to trace the return route of the illustrious Venetian to Vochan. He mentions somewhat vaguely the province of Caugigu, which Cordier believes to be the Kiao-Chi-Kwe of the Chinese, situated far to the south-east of Tagaung. Again, Aniu according to the same authority represents Northern Annam, with Toloman, or 'The Mountain Barbarians', to the east of Vochan. Finally, north of Toloman is the province of Chuju, where, interested as ever in sport, the author gives us a spirited account of how tigers are hunted by an archer and two dogs.

As already stated, Marco made more than one journey in China, and consequently it is impossible to trace the exact route which he followed in every instance, but he finally brings us back to Sindu-fu, after giving to his readers down the ages an unrivalled account of the provinces, cities and people which he had visited.

<sup>1</sup> Abundance of cotton, ginger, sugar, elephants, spices.



CHAPTER XIII

MARCO POLO EXPLORES MANJI



And I Marcus Paulus was in this Citie of Singuy [Su-chou], and did tell standing upon a bridge at one time fiue thousande shippes or barkes that sailed vpon this riuer, and vpon thie riuer there standeth two hundred Cities, being greater than this that we have spoken of.

JOHN FRAMPTON, *Marcus Paulus*, ch. 94

In this lond is the port of Zeitona which is a verie riche citie and of grete trate, and hath a verie good port. Here is grete trat of clothe of golde, and of sylke and perles and pretiose stones, and of all sort of spyces.

BARLOW, *A Brief Summe of Geographie*

## CHAPTER XIII

### MARCO POLO EXPLORES MANJI

MARCO POLO started on his second great journey, or series of journeys in China, from Jonju, where, as mentioned in the last chapter, the two imperial highways bifurcated. Travelling through fertile, densely populated country for four days, he reached a second Cachanfu (Hochien fu), in the province of Chihli, which 'is crossed by a large river on which great quantities of merchandise are carried to Cambaluc'. Everywhere he notes thriving centres, but he especially praises Tandin fu (Yen-chou), which 'has dependent upon it eleven imperial cities, namely, cities that are noble and of great wealth'.

Marco here breaks off his narrative to eulogise 'the maidens of Cathay who are without peer as regards virtue, and the keeping of the ornament of modesty'. Is he making a comparison with Venice when he continues: 'If it happen they go abroad on some fitting errand, they go in the company of their mothers without looking shamelessly into people's faces, and wearing certain pretty hats of theirs, which prevent them looking up'? To turn to other customs, Marco notes that the Cathayans had eighty-four idols. He was especially interested in idols 'who are concerned with the finding of lost objects', partly because a ring that he had lost was found through their agency. But he hastens to add, somewhat ungenerously one would think, 'Not that I made them any offering or paid reverence to them'. Surely an offering to the priest was called for!

## *The Quest for Cathay*

Continuing his journey, Marco strikes the Great Canal at Sinjumatu (Hsin-chou-ma-tou), where he comments: 'This city possesses such immense shipping, I mean such a number of ships, that no one who has not been there, can believe it'. After passing through other cities and travelling some thirteen days from Sinjumatu, the Hoang-ho is reached. Yule, with his amazing industry, supplies a sketch-map showing the course of this wayward river which, from about A.D. 1200 to 1853, discharged into the Ocean so far to the south of its present course.<sup>1</sup>

Before crossing into Manji, Marco gives some account of its conquest by Kubilai's general, Baian, who took city after city until he reached Kinsai, the capital. There, according to Marco, the Facfur,<sup>2</sup> as he terms the Sung Emperor, 'who found all his pleasure in women and in doing good to the poor', fled to islands in the Ocean. Actually Marco was mistaken, since the Emperor to whom he refers died in 1274, and Kinsai was surrendered two years later by the Empress-Regent on behalf of the Emperor, who was a boy of four.

Continuing his description of the cities visited, Marco especially refers to Yanju (Yang-chou), since he held the government of this city for three years by order of the great Khan. No wonder he was able to give such detailed and accurate accounts of the various cities of Manji!

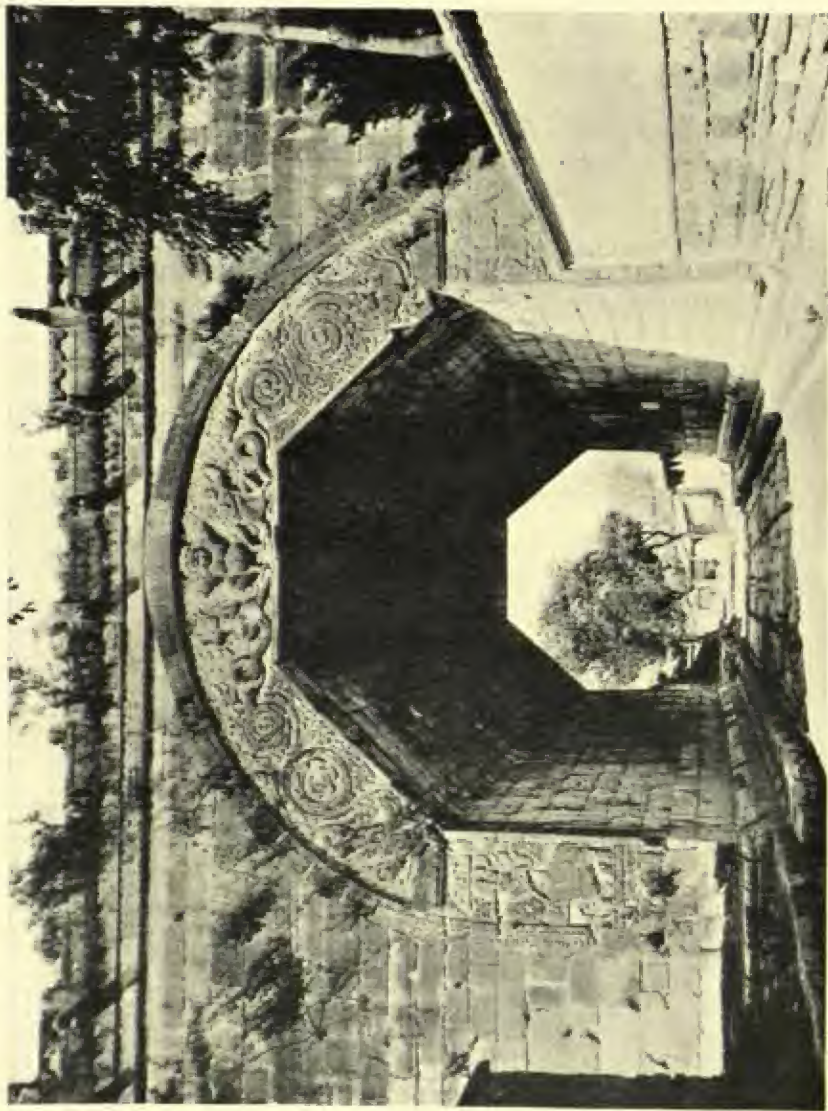
He next mentions the province of Nanking to the west, which was noted for its abundance of silk. After the overthrow of the Mongol or Yuen dynasty, the Ming dynasty made

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* ii, p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> *Facfur*, or *Baghpur*, signifying 'Son of Heaven', was the title given to the Emperor of China by the old Persian and Arab writers.







THE GREAT GATE AT CHU-YUNG KUAN

From Oswald Siren's *History of Early Chinese Art*. Ernest Benn, Ltd.

## *Marco Polo explores Manji*

Nanking their capital. To-day, as we know, Nanking, once again, occupies that position.

We are told of the capture of Sanianfu (Hsiang-yang fu), and Marco claims credit for the construction by his followers of 'mangonels, capable of throwing stones of three hundred pounds in weight'. The effect on the defenders was terrifying and the city surrendered. This claim, however, is not accepted, since the city apparently capitulated in March 1273, whereas the Polos did not reach China on their second journey until some two years later.<sup>1</sup>

Marco struck the Yangtse near the sea and again eulogises it: 'This river, the greatest in the world, is so long, and crosses so many regions, and has so many cities on its banks, that I may assert that there are more boats on it laden with more precious and costly wares, than sail on all the rivers and seas of the Christians put together. . . . I have heard from the official that gathers the Great Khan's revenue, that two hundred thousand boats sail on that river annually.' At the city of Chen-Chiang Fu, Marco notes that, in 1278, Marsakis,<sup>2</sup> a Nestorian Christian, was appointed Governor for three years and built two churches. It is interesting to note how Kubilai chose his officials, and also the usual length of their tenure of office.

Among the many cities Marco traversed, special mention must be made of Suju (Su-chou) with its circuit of sixty miles, its vast population, including 'wise merchants, clever in all handicrafts, and great natural philosophers, and great leeches who are learned in the secrets of nature'. Situated in one of the gardens of China, and possessing easy access to the sea, the city

<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of this difficulty *vide* Hudson, *op. cit.* p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Probably *Mar Sergius*.



## *The Quest for Cathay*

was coupled by the Chinese with Hang-chou in the celebrated proverb:

There's Paradise above, 'tis true,  
But here below we've Hang and Su.

To quote once again: 'After three days, one reaches the most noble city of Kinsai, which is as much as to say in our language, the "City of Heaven".<sup>1</sup> Seeing that we have now come to this city, we will tell you of its splendour: and it is truly worth while, for verily it is the noblest and richest city in the world.' For his description of Kinsai, Marco relies on a letter sent by the Empress-Regent to Baian, the accuracy of which he guarantees. According to it, 'the city was about one hundred miles in circuit, and this is because (apart from the immense number of people) the streets and canals are very broad; and then there are the open places'. The city possessed twelve major guilds for the principal crafts, and 'The merchants are so many and so wealthy, that no one could tell the whole truth, so extraordinary is it. And I will add that the great men and their wives do nothing with their own hands: they live with as much delicacy and cleanliness as if they were kings. And their women, too, are most delicate and angel-like.'

Marco describes the lake with two islands, containing beautiful and sumptuous palaces, his description recalling the wonders of Udaipur. The system of hospitals, the guards on each of the twelve thousand bridges, the watch for outbreaks of fire, the numerous public baths, the paved streets, the carriages and the enormous revenue all point to greater prosperity and a higher civilisation than anything prevailing at the period in Europe.

<sup>1</sup> Actually Kinsai (Hang-chou) signifies 'the capital', but, owing to the charms of its courtesans, Marco writes: 'when foreigners return home they say that they have been in the City of Heaven, and long to be able to return there'.

## *Marco Polo explores Manji*

Against this was the fact that the Sung dynasty was effete and that the people were 'incapable of handling arms'. The Chinese have a proverb that 'nails are not made from good iron, nor soldiers from good men', and this attitude of mind helps to explain their weakness in defending their country. They fell an easy prey to the virile Mongols, who, under Kubilai, appear to have administered the country with considerable success. Marco Polo's description of Kinsai represented the culmination of the wonders of the Far East, which caused Europe to marvel, while the Venetians nicknamed him *Il Milione*.

Upon resuming his travels, Marco traversed a fertile country until he reached the kingdom of Fujū (Fu-chien). 'One journey six days to the south-east, over mountains and valleys, and through regions thickly studded with cities, towns and villages. . . . The people will eat the whole of a man who has died a violent death and they say that it is excellent food. . . . They are always on the look-out for an opportunity of killing someone, to drink his blood, and then eat him.' After reading of the marvels of Kinsai, it is rather a shock to find such barbarous savages on the borders of civilised China, but wild tribes are still known to exist in the upper part of the Canton province, where they are known as 'dogs-heads'.

On the Min River he visited Kenlinfu (Chien-ming fu), with three splendid bridges. Farther on, a great sugar-cane area was reached in the neighbourhood of Fujū (Fu-chou), and six days' journey from Fujū brought the traveller to the celebrated port of Zaitun (Chuan-chau),<sup>1</sup> situated to the north of the modern port of Amoy.

<sup>1</sup> Zaitun signifies an olive tree in Arabic and Persian, and was considered to be a suitable approximation to the difficult Chinese word. Similarly Jerusalem was termed *Zaituniyah*.



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If Kinsai were the greatest of cities, Zaitun was the greatest of ports: 'Here is the harbour whither all the ships of India come with much costly merchandise. . . . It is also the port whither go the merchants of Manji. . . . And I assure you that the Great Khan receives enormous revenues from this city and port, for you must know that all the ships that come from India pay ten per cent of the value of the goods. . . . It is one of the two greatest harbours in the world for the amount of its trade.' It is difficult to guess what other harbour was comparable to it, or whether this was merely an idiom of the age, as Yule suggests. Ibn Battuta is more emphatic: 'The harbour of Zaitun is one of the greatest in the world—I am wrong, it is the greatest'. Again Marco writes: 'In this province they make porcelain dishes, of all sizes, the finest that can be imagined. There are quantities of them and they are cheap, so cheap indeed, that for a Venetian *grosso* you can purchase three of them, such fine ones, that you could not imagine finer.' This is very early use of the word 'porcelain'. Marco in his account of Yunnan mentions that 'they use white porcelain, namely the shells one finds in the sea', and thereby gives the derivation of the word. Actually, I understand that ground shells are only utilised in the manufacture of the soft-paste ware.

In the section dealing with Zaitun, thanks to Benedetto, we have fresh material of importance dealing with a sect who 'in a certain temple of theirs had three painted figures, representing three apostles—three of the seventy who went about the world preaching'. The Polos were much interested and finally decided they were Christians. Actually, as Pelliot points out,<sup>1</sup> they were Manichaeans. It is indeed interesting

<sup>1</sup> *Journal des Savants*, Jan. 1929, p. 42.



### *Marco Polo explores Manji*

to know that the followers of Manes had established themselves on the Pacific Ocean to the number of 700,000 families. Did not Simon de Montfort lead a Crusade against the Albigenses, who were accused of Manichaeism, in 1209? Thus this pessimistic creed spread from the Pacific to the Atlantic—an amazing range in view of the difficulties of intercourse in the Middle Ages.

Marco concludes this section of his great work as follows: 'Of the nine kingdoms of Manji, we have told you only of three, namely Yanju, Kinsai and Fujū. Of these you have been well informed . . . because Messer Marco himself traversed them. . . . Of the other six, he heard and learned many things, but, as he did not traverse them, his description could not be as full as for the others. Hence we will be silent concerning them.'



CHAPTER XIV

THE POLOS RETURN TO EUROPE



He was the first Traveller to trace a route across the whole longitude of Asia, naming and describing kingdom after kingdom which he had seen with his own eyes; the deserts of Persia, the flowering plateaux and wild gorges of Badakhshan, the jade-bearing rivers of Khotan, the Mongolian Steppes, cradle of the power that had so lately threatened to swallow up Christendom, the new and brilliant Court that had been established at Cambaluc: The first Traveller to reveal China in all its wealth and vastness, its mighty rivers, its huge cities, its rich manufactures, its swarming population, the inconceivably vast fleets that quickened its seas and its inland waters; to tell us of the nations on its borders with all their eccentricities of manner and worship; of Tibet with its sordid devotees; of Burma with its golden pagodas and their tinkling crowns; of Laos, of Siam, of Cochin China, of Japan, the Eastern Thule, with its rosy pearls and golden-roofed palaces; the first to speak of that Museum of Beauty and Wonder, still so imperfectly ransacked, the Indian Archipelago, source of those aromatics then so highly prized and whose origin was so dark; of Java the Pearl of Islands; of Sumatra with its many Kings, its costly products, and its cannibal races; of the naked savages of Nicobar and Andaman; of Ceylon the Isle of Gems with its Sacred Mountain and its Tomb of Adam; of India The Great, not as a dreamland of Alexandrian fables, but as a country seen and partially explored, with its virtuous Brahmans, its obscene ascetics, its diamonds and the strange tales of their acquisition, its sea-beds of pearl, and its powerful sun; the first in mediæval times to give any distinct account of the secluded Christian Empire of Abyssinia, and the semi-Christian Island of Socotra; to speak, though indeed dimly, of Zangibar with its negroes and its ivory, and of the vast and distant Madagascar, bordering on the Dark Ocean of the South, with its Ruc and other monstrosities; and, in a remotely opposite region, of Siberia and the Arctic Ocean, of dog-sledges, white bears, and reindeer-riding Tunguses.

SIR HENRY YULE

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE POLOS RETURN TO EUROPE

FOR seventeen years the Polos had lived in China, where they had amassed considerable wealth. But they feared what might happen to them if the aged Kubilai died, and began to yearn for home. The *Khákan*, however, was unwilling to lose them, and but for a happy chance we should in all probability have lost their priceless records.

Arghun Khan, the *Ilkhan* of Persia, who was Kubilai's great-nephew, had lost his favourite wife, Bolgana,<sup>1</sup> in 1286. Some three years later, envoys from the *Ilkhan* reached *Khan-baliq* to report the death of Bolgana, who 'had left it stated in her will that no lady sit on her throne or be the wife of Arghun, unless she were of her own lineage'. Kubilai warmly welcomed these envoys from this distant part of his vast empire and, agreeing to fulfil their request, in due course 'summoned a lady called Cocachin, who was of the lineage of the Queen Bolgana, and was seventeen years old, and most beautiful and charming'. The three barons who constituted the mission were given a strong escort for the bride and rode for eight months on their way back to Persia by land, but, owing to hostilities between warring Tartar rulers, the route was closed and they were forced to return and report their failure to the *Khákan*.

'At that time, Messer Marco had returned from India, after traversing many strange seas, and had told many novelties of those lands.' The barons, who were almost certainly influenced

<sup>1</sup> The word signifies a 'sable'.



## *The Quest for Cathay*

by their conversations with the Venetian, decided to return to Persia by sea, and realising the great value of the experienced Marco Polo, begged the *Khákan* to send them back by sea and to allow the Polos to accompany them. Kubilai most unwillingly granted this request. He then prepared a fleet of fourteen ships, furnished with supplies for two years; and thus, early in 1292, the Princess, in charge of the barons and the Polos, started on her long voyage to the Persian Gulf—a voyage which lasted over two years.

Marco at this point refers to the composition of a fleet in China, and incidentally proves how far ahead the Chinese were of the Europeans in this respect, probably because the Chinese built for Ocean voyages, whereas Europeans mainly constructed ships for use in the Mediterranean Sea. He writes: 'The ships, upon which the merchants go to India, are made of a wood called fir, and of pine. They have a deck. On this deck, there are, in most of them, sixty cabins, in each of which a merchant can live comfortably . . . some of the bigger ships also have, inside them, thirteen tanks or compartments, made of strong boards firmly joined together; thus, if the ship should chance by any accident to spring a leak, then the water falls into the bilge, which is always kept empty, and they stop the leak. . . . Moreover they carry a much larger cargo than our ships.'

Before describing the countries he visited on this and other voyages, Marco first refers to Japan, which he did not visit. 'Chipangu [Japan]', he states, 'is an island towards the east, in the high seas, 1500 miles from the continent. It is a very large island. . . . You must know that they have immense quantities of gold, because it is found on the spot in great abundance. . . .



## *The Polos return to Europe*

I will tell you, too, of a great wonder concerning one of the palaces of the Lord of this island. You must know that he has a very large palace, all covered with fine gold. Just as we roof our houses and churches with lead, so this palace is all roofed over with fine gold: so the value of it is such that one can barely calculate it. Further, the floors of the chambers, of which there is a great number, are also of fine gold, over two fingers in thickness. . . . They have pearls in abundance, of a rose colour, very beautiful, and round, and large. They are worth as much as the white ones, more indeed. . . . Besides pearls, they also have abundance of many kinds of precious stones. It is a rich island, so rich that no one can tell its wealth.' The annotation of Columbus on Cyampagu, as it is termed in the Latin text, runs: *aurum in copia maxima margarite rubee*. No wonder that, in view of its reported situation fifteen hundred miles east of China and the incredible wealth mentioned by Marco Polo, Japan was his objective.

Marco gives an interesting account of the unsuccessful expedition of Kubilai against Japan, with an amusing description of a clever ruse by which the invaders, marooned on a small island, seized the Japanese transports. He then sums up: 'You must know that the sea in which these islands lie, is called the Sea of Chin, which means the sea opposite Manji, for in the language of the islanders, Chin means Manji. . . . Moreover I will add that this Sea of Chin, yet is nothing but the Ocean Sea. They call it the Sea of China, just as we speak of the Sea of England, or the Sea of Rochelle.'

Marco now returns to Zaitun and writes: 'On leaving the port of Zaitun, one sails quite fifteen hundred miles to the west-south-west . . . and reaches a country called Chamba. . . . Every

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year they send a tribute of elephants and aloes-wood to the Great Khan. . . . And I will add that, in the year 1285, I, Marco Polo, was in that kingdom, and this King at that time had three hundred and twenty-six children'—thus rivalling Fath Ali Shah, 'the philoprogenitive ruler of Persia', as Lord Curzon termed him.

Chamba formed part of the present province of Annam, and Marco concludes his description by a reference to 'the wood called ebony, which is exceedingly black, and of which chessmen and ink-holders are made'.

The next chapter runs: 'You must know that, on leaving the Kingdom of Chamba, one sails fifteen hundred miles south-south-east and reaches a very large island called Java.' According to experienced sailors who know the matter well, it is the largest island in the world. . . . The greater part of the spices sold in the world, comes from this island.'

To resume the voyage: 'One sails between south and south-west for seven hundred miles, after which one find two islands, one larger and one smaller. The one is called Sondur and the other Condur. One leaves these islands and then proceeds for some five hundred miles to the south-east. One then reaches a continental province, called *Locac*, which is very large and rich. . . . From this country come all the porcelain shells that are used as money in different countries.'

The Sondur and Condur islands are well known to-day as Pulo Condore, which constituted an important landmark

<sup>1</sup> It must be remembered that Marco weaves into his description countries and islands which he visited on previous voyages. Java was not visited on the final voyage, and Marco picks up the thread of his narrative from Chamba and not from Java. Generally speaking, he is not very clear in this section of his voyages. Java is, of course, very much smaller than Sumatra.



### *The Polos return to Europe*

for the Arab navigators. Locac is identified with the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula. In connexion with Locac a curious error has arisen. Marco's description was misinterpreted into a voyage actually made to Java, and it was accepted that the distances of the places mentioned in his onward voyage must be measured not from Chamba but from Java. Through this misinterpretation of his words, Marco is made to describe a great, fertile, auriferous continent called Locac, situated about one thousand miles to the south-south-west of Java. By a printer's error this country of Locac became Beach!

In the globe constructed by Behaim in 1492, the very year in which Columbus discovered the New World, Java Minor is shown in the area of Tasmania, whereas it actually was Sumatra. Indeed Marco makes no mention of lands situated to the south of Java. But his words were misunderstood and it was believed that he had described and visited the Great Southern Continent.

To resume, from Locac the fleet sailed five hundred miles to the south, to an island, Pentam, which is clearly Bentan, situated at the eastern extremity of the Straits of Malacca.

Marco next apparently leads us for some sixty miles between Locac and Pentam, and then to the south-east for thirty miles through the Straits: 'To an island that forms a kingdom; both it and its capital are called Malaiur'. This word presumably is the same as Malay, and Penzer possesses evidence that it was the name of a district on the East Sumatran coast. Of Java the Less, or Sumatra, Marco writes: 'In this island there are immense riches—abundance of precious spices, aloes-wood, brazil-wood, ebony and many other kinds of spices that on account of the great distance, and the dangers of the voyage,



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never reach our countries, and are only sent to the provinces of Manji and Cathay'. He notes with amazement that the North Star is never to be seen there, 'neither little nor much'.

Marco states that there were eight kingdoms in Java the Less, six of which he describes. Ferlec (Parlak) is first mentioned and its position is preserved by the native name of Tanjong<sup>1</sup> Parlak for the north-east horn of Sumatra, termed Diamond Point by European navigators. Next we read of the neighbouring Basman (Pasai). In this state—they apparently adjoined one another on the western end of the north coast of the island—Marco was much struck by the rhinoceros, and ends his description: 'It is a hideous beast to look at, and in no way like what we think and say in our countries, namely a beast that lets itself be taken in the lap of a virgin. Indeed, I assure you that it is quite the opposite of what we say it is.'

Marco spent five months in the kingdom of Sumatra, a name which was later applied to the whole island. He fortified a position with deep trenches on the land side, while the harbour was protected by timber towers. This was done 'out of fear of these bestial people who devour men'. It is interesting to note that he 'had landed with quite two thousand followers'. Marco writes most appreciatively of the coco-nuts 'as big as a man's head, and delicious to eat. When they are fresh, these nuts have, inside the kernel, a certain liquid that in taste and sweetness is better than any wine or any other drink that ever was drunk.' Dagroian, the next kingdom to be mentioned, has not been identified, but Lambri can be located to

<sup>1</sup> Tanjong signifies 'cape'. Yule remarks that Ferlec is the Arab form, there being no 'p' in that language. A well-known instance of this is that the Parsees of Bombay are so called from what was originally termed the province of Pars, but which, after the Arab conquest, was called Fars.

## *The Polos return to Europe*

this area, at three days' sailing due west of Sumatra. Here, Marco tells us, 'there are men—indeed, they are the majority—with tails a palm long'. It is not generally known that in the Middle Ages there were similar stories about our ancestors! In the 'Romance of Cœur de Lion', the Emperor of Cyprus exclaims:

'Out *Taylands*, out of my paly's!  
Now go, and say your *tayled* King  
That I do owe him nothing.'<sup>1</sup>

Finally we have the kingdom of Fansur, situated down the west coast of Sumatra, where Marco refers to 'the best camphor in the world, called Fansur Camphor'. He also gives an interesting description of the preparation of sago. These petty states of Sumatra, under the stimulus of Islam, rapidly changed. In the early fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta was received by the Sultan of Jawa, 'who was constantly engaged in warring for the faith against the infidels'. In 1615 Achin, which established its hegemony over these coastal states, despatched an expedition of five hundred sail against Portuguese Malacca with galleys larger than any constructed at that period in Europe. Nowhere has the civilising influence of Islam been seen to greater advantage than in these tropical islands.

Resuming the voyage, Marco next describes Necuveran (Nicobar Islands), where 'I assure you that they go about entirely naked both the men and the women'. Of the neighbouring Agaman (Andaman) Island, he writes: 'You must know in very truth that all the men in this island have heads like dogs. I assure you that, as regards their heads, they all look like big mastiffs.' Ibn Battuta describes the people of neighbouring

<sup>1</sup> Weber, ii, 83.



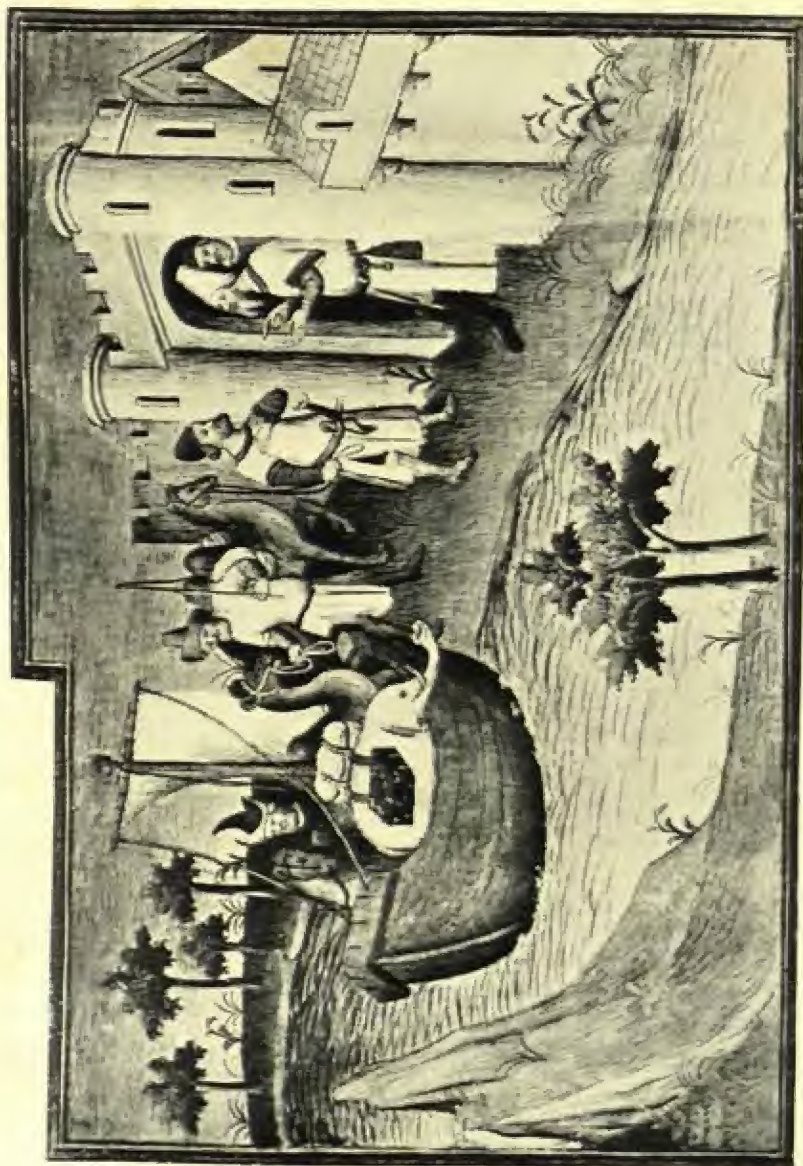
## *The Quest for Cathay*

Arakan as having dogs' mouths, but spoils these remarks from an anthropological point of view by extolling the beauty of the women!

Marco the Jeweller is naturally most enthusiastic in his praise of the precious stones of Seilan (Ceylon), the Sarandib of the Moslem writers: 'You must know that, in this island alone, and in no other part of the world, are born the noble and precious rubies. Sapphires, topazes, amethysts, garnets, and many other precious gems are also born there.' He then describes the most beautiful ruby in the world. The rubies of Ceylon were indeed famous throughout the East. Did not Sinbad the Sailor write: 'The King of Sarandib gave me a cup of ruby a span high; and a bed covered with the skin of a serpent which swalloweth the elephant, and a slave-girl like a shining moon'?

Upon resuming the voyage from Ceylon, it is clear that Marco has confused the relative positions of the ports which he visited, probably owing to the difficulty of fitting in ports he touched at on previous voyages. Consequently I propose to describe them as they were actually on the map at the time. It is unreasonable to suppose that the fleet whose voyage we are chiefly describing went out of its course to Maabar (the Coromandel coast). Accordingly I will first refer to Marco's descriptions of its various kingdoms and ports. He devotes much space to Maabar and remarks that 'there is no need for tailors or workmen to cut or sew clothes, for they all go naked at all seasons'. So much for this important question! Marco naturally gives a full account of the pearl fisheries. He also expatiates on the mass of jewels worn by the king, who even 'wears splendid pearls and other gems on his toes'. He is stated





ARRIVAL AT HORMUZ OF A SHIP FROM INDIA  
From *Livre des Merveilles*, Bibliothèque Nationale



## *The Polos return to Europe*

to have five hundred wives and five hundred concubines! He also describes *suttee*, the cult of the ox, and the damsels who are consecrated to the idols. Farther north he arrives at the kingdom of Mutfili (Motupalli), identified with Telingana, where he describes the methods of securing diamonds: 'You must know that there are certain great, deep gullies, with such precipitous sides, that no one can go to the bottom of them. But this is what they do: they take many pieces of raw bleeding flesh, and throw them into the gullies. The places into which the flesh is thrown, are full of diamonds, which get stuck to the flesh. Now you must know that on these mountains there are many white eagles that feed on serpents. When they see the pieces of flesh at the bottom of the gullies, they swoop down upon them, and carry them away. . . . As soon as the men see them settled down and tearing the flesh, the merchants hasten thither as fast as possible. The eagles fly away . . . and the men find plenty of diamonds.' A practically identical account of the acquisition of diamonds is given in the *Arabian Nights*.

The province of Maabar was also famous for the shrine of St. Thomas,<sup>1</sup> situated close to the city of Madras. 'Both Christians and Saracens go thither on pilgrimage. For you must know that the Saracens of those parts hold the Saint in great reverence, and say that he was a Saracen.' Similarly Busbecq, who travelled in the middle of the sixteenth century, mentions that, at a shrine in Asia Minor, the Moslems worshipped the saint as Khizr (Elijah), but the Christians as St. George.

The last port on this coast to be mentioned was Cail, Kayal or Coulum, once a famous port, in the modern district of

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Chapter IV, p. 62.



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Tinnevelly, but now situated more than a mile inland, and in ruins: 'At this city touch all the ships that come from the west—from Cormos [Hormuz], Kisi, Aden and all Arabia—laden with horses and other wares'. It is mentioned by Varthema and also by Fitch, in 1588, who wrote: 'We passed by Coulum [Quilon], which is a fort of the Portugals; from whence cometh great store of pepper'.

We may now pick up the thread of the voyage once again and touch at Comari (Cape Comorin), which is mentioned as the place 'where one can see something of the North Star, which we had no longer seen since we left the island of Java'. Marco then refers to the kingdom of Eli (Mount Dely), which the ships of Manji visit, but load up pepper and spices quickly as there are no harbours. Further on he tells of the kingdom of Melibar (Malabar), rich indeed in spices and other wares, but infamous for its pirates, 'who make a cordon across the sea, covering a hundred miles'. However, after seizing a ship, 'to the men they do no harm, saying to them: "Go and get you other wealth: maybe you will bring more to us"'.

After Eli, Tana, still existing on the island of Salsette, is referred to 'as a vast and excellent kingdom' producing brown frankincense. It was also a great commercial centre and, as we shall see, was visited by Odoric in the following century. Continuing the voyage up the western coast of India, there is nothing of importance to note at Canbaet (Cambay) or Seme-nat (Somnat in Kathiawar). Marco then describes the province of Lar, an early name for Gujerat. Here he eulogises the Brahmins as 'among the best and most trustworthy merchants in the world'. He also mentions that the Chughis (Yogis) live to two hundred years by swallowing quicksilver and sulphur!











### *The Polos return to Europe*

The kingdom of Gozurat, which is, of course, Gujerat, is described separately, and Marco writes that 'in this Kingdom, there are the worst pirates in the world'. He notes the growth of cotton, while he declares that 'the best and finest leather goods in the world and the most costly' are made in Gujerat. Curiously enough, no reference is made to the mighty Indus, and so we now come to Kesmacoran (Kej-Makran), which is described as the last province of India. Marco probably only coasted it, and my experience of this desert country is that Marco exaggerated its fertility. He then describes other lands from hearsay, but it is possible that he visited Calatu (Kalhat), situated close to the mouth of the Persian Gulf.

At last, one of the greatest voyages on record ended at Hormuz. But at what a cost? 'I assure you, in very truth, that when they went on board the ships, they were no less than six hundred, without counting the sailors. And all died except eighteen. Of Argon's three envoys, only one survived, he whose name was Coja; of all the ladies and damsels of the retinue, one alone was left.'

Arghun Khan, the correspondent of Edward I, who had despatched the embassy, was dead. Accordingly, acting on the orders of Kiacaitu (Gaykhatu), the reigning *Il-Khan*, the Princess Cocachin '*moult bele dame et avenant*', became the bride of his (Arghun's) son Casan (Ghazan) Khan, who finally became *Ilkhan*. The Polos, in due course, handed over the Princess, in the region of the Arbre Sol. They then traversed northern Persia to the court of Gaykhatu, who honoured them greatly at his capital of Tabriz. Finally they reached Venice 'in the year 1295, after Christ's Incarnation'. They had accomplished the greatest series of land journeys of all time.

## *The Quest for Cathay*

In estimating the importance of Marco Polo's explorations, the first question to be answered is to what extent he immediately influenced the outlook of the world and what were the permanent results of his travels. But before dealing with these questions, it is as well to disclaim any scientific knowledge for Marco. He notes the disappearance of the Pole Star in some of the islands he visited, and when it reappears on his horizon he estimates the latitude by the Pole Star rising so many cubits. Elsewhere, as we have seen, he states that certain islands lie so far to the north that the Pole Star is left behind to the south.

Marco makes more than one reference to charts. For example he states: 'You must know that in the Sea of India there are 12,700 islands, counting inhabited and uninhabited ones, according to what is stated in the charts and books of the skilful mariners, who are used to sailing in that sea'. There are constant references to bearings and distance, so much so that Yule prepared a map termed 'Probable View of Marco Polo's Own Geography'.<sup>1</sup>

Marco Polo's greatest service to Europe was the revelation of the wealth, the swarming populations, the splendid buildings and the civilisation of China, but to the European of the period it seemed like a fantastic fairy-tale. So much so was this the case that Marco was nicknamed *Il Milione*, owing to his constant use of the word in his description of the wealth of Kubilai, and the population of Kinsay. In other words, he suffered the fate of a prophet in his own country. Sansovino, writing in the sixteenth century, supports this point of view: 'No faith was placed in Marco Polo because of the extravagant things that he recounted; but in the days of our Fathers, Columbus

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* i, 108.



## *The Polos return to Europe*

augmented belief in him'.<sup>1</sup> There is also the story to the effect that on his death-bed he was adjured to confess that he had been lying about Cathay. This was surely quite a probable story.

In my Introduction I have explained how the crude cosmogony of the Old Testament had hindered every branch of knowledge, and more especially geography, in the Middle Ages. Consequently Europeans of the period, with their vague conceptions, bound by rigid principles, mingled with childish credulity and superstitious fears, simply could not grasp the wonders he revealed and, failing to do so, belittled them. However, in the great Catalan map of 1375, which represents the first genuine attempt in the Middle Ages to produce a map free from the traditional dogmas referred to above, Marco Polo's work constitutes its basis for Central Asia, for the Far East, for the Spice Islands and for part of India. To quote Beazley: 'Here indeed we have something like the sketch of Kubilai's realm which Marco himself would have made, if he had turned cartographer. Here we have Cathay (including Polo's *Manji*, or South China) placed in its true position as a great country in the extreme east and south-east of the Old World, no longer thrust far up towards the north-east and the Arctic regions; for the first time in the history of geography the great Indian peninsula, so utterly misconceived in Ptolemy, is represented with a decent approximation to its real form and relative position.'<sup>2</sup> He ends this appreciation with equal praise of Marco's description of Indo-China, Java and Sumatra. I would add that Martin Behaim's globe, in 1492, shows the influence of Marco Polo, since Ptolemy's great South Land

<sup>1</sup> *Venezia . . . Descritta*, f. 23 v.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* iii, p. 19.

## *The Quest for Cathay*

now appears as a string of important islands stretching from the south of Asia to the south-east of Africa.

We next ask to what extent Marco Polo influenced and assisted Columbus, Vasco da Gama and their successors in their discoveries. Columbus, apart from his implicit belief in special divine favour, relied for his scientific views on Pierre d'Ailly, who is referred to in my Introduction,<sup>1</sup> and whose views consisted almost entirely of a compilation of former writers. These views were, generally speaking, empirical. For actual facts Columbus relied on Marco Polo, and there is no doubt whatever in my mind that Chipangu, or Japan, was rightly made the objective of his epoch-making voyage, not only owing to the supposed golden roofs and floors of its palace, but also to the fact that Marco Polo's erroneous estimate of its distance to the east of China was fifteen hundred miles. Asia too, as I have already mentioned, was given an erroneous extension of about one hundred degrees of longitude to the east by Ptolemy.

I have referred above to the copy of Marco Polo's work that was annotated by Columbus. Actually there are notes to most of the chapters and, as was to be expected, the wealth of the cities of China and Japan in gold, jewels, silk and spices form the bulk of the annotations. In short, it may confidently be claimed that the description given by Marco Polo of the wealth of China, and her silk, the gold and pearls of Japan, and the spices of Java, Sumatra and India, provided the main incentive for Columbus, Vasco da Gama and the Conquistadors. It is especially interesting to note that Columbus thought of China as Cathay and also believed that it was ruled by a *Khákan*—so

<sup>1</sup> P. 10.



## *The Polos return to Europe*

completely had darkness fallen on the Far East.

Libri writes: 'The finest of all the results due to the influence of Marco Polo is that of having stirred Columbus to the discovery of the New World. Columbus, jealous of Polo's laurels, spent his life in preparing means to get to that Zipangu of which the Venetian traveller had told such great things; his desire was to reach China by sailing westward, and in his way, he fell in with America.'<sup>1</sup>

To turn to England, in 1579, Frampton's translation of *Marco Polo* appeared. In his Dedication he expressed the wish 'that it mighte give greate lighte to our Seamen, if ever this nation chaunced to find a passage out of the frozen zone to the South Seas'. That Frampton did not work in vain is proved by the fact that Drake, Raleigh and Frobisher studied this valuable book. Finally, it has been the most important guide for explorers in Central Asia and China down to the present day. I can testify personally to its extreme importance, since I have followed in the footsteps of Marco Polo in Persia, across the Pamirs and in Chinese Turkestan.

Before summing up, it is interesting to speculate what manner of man Marco Polo reveals himself to us. He was certainly a typical European of the Middle Ages, in the sense that he devoutly believed in the various miracles he narrates. Apart from this, he was amongst the hardiest of men, incurring constant dangers and hardships with only passing comment, practical, deeply versed in commerce, prudent, temperate, tactful, possessing a sense of humour, and a genuine sportsman. He describes the boundless wealth of Kubilai with a sympathetic admiration, while he was deeply interested in the

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire des Sciences Mathématiques*, ii, 150.

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customs which he describes, and was quietly amused by some of them. Marco is stated to have acquired several of the languages of the country, but evidently Chinese was not among them. Indeed he viewed China rather as a Mongol might have done, more especially as regards the nomenclature of places. He never mentions tea, nor the foot-binding of the women nor the fishing with cormorants. Marco was obviously not well read in European literature—it would have been remarkable if he were. He refers to the delightful legendary *Romance of Alexander* time and again, but to no other European work. Were I asked to epitomise the achievements of Marco Polo, I should reply: 'He opened the land-gates and the water-gates of the Far East to Europe'.



CHAPTER XV

THE SUCCESSORS OF MARCO POLO

A certain king of this part of the world, by name George, belonging to the sect of Nestorian Christians, and of the illustrious family of the great king who was called Prester John of India, in the first year of my arrival here attached himself to me, and being converted by me to the truth of the Catholic faith, took the lesser orders, and when I celebrated mass he used to attend me wearing his royal robes.

Letter of Friar John de Monte Corvino, dated 8th January 1305

A dark mist has descended upon the Farther East, covering Manji and Cathay with those cities of which the old travellers told such wonders, Cambalu and Cansay and Zaytun and Chinkalan. And when the veil rises before the Portuguese explorers a century and a half later, those names are heard of no more.

YULE



## CHAPTER XV

### THE SUCCESSORS OF MARCO POLO

AMONG the most interesting embassies to reach Europe in the Middle Ages was one which Arghun, the *Ilkhan* ruler of Persia, despatched under the leadership of a Mongol Christian, whose narrative was, in effect, the counterpart, so far as Europe was concerned, of what Marco Polo had written of Asia. The story commences with two Uighurs, born at Peking, Mark and Bar-soma,<sup>1</sup> who determined to become monks and to visit the Holy Sepulchre at distant Jerusalem. After a long and dangerous journey across Asia the pilgrims reached Armenia, but could not proceed to Syria as the roads were closed. They settled in Mesopotamia, where Mark was ultimately elected Patriarch of the Nestorian Church under the title of *Mar Yaballaha III*. His faithful friend Bar-soma remained with him. Six years had passed when it chanced that the *Ilkhan* Arghun determined to despatch a mission to the Pope and kings of Europe with a view to making an alliance against the Mamelukes of Egypt, their common enemy. The Patriarch was asked to recommend a suitable envoy and his choice fell on *Rabban Bar-soma*, who as a Christian of Uighur extraction and an intimate friend of the Patriarch of the Nestorian Church would be a *persona grata* in Europe. It would appear that the hatred of the period of Carpini and Rubruquis against the Nestorian Christians had by this time disappeared—at any rate

<sup>1</sup> This section is partly based on *Histoire du Patriarche Mar Yaballaha et du Moine Rabban Cauma*, trans. by J. B. Chabot in *La Revue de l'Orient Latin*, 1893.

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so far as Europe was concerned.

In 1287, Bar-soma, accompanied by an imposing retinue and well furnished with gold and suitable gifts, started on his important mission. He first visited Constantinople, where he was welcomed by the Emperor, one of whose daughters had been married to the ruler of the Golden Horde. After fulfilling his mission at Constantinople, where he gazed with rapture on the cathedral of Santa Sophia, Bar-soma sailed for Italy. He witnessed Stromboli in eruption, and from Naples he viewed a naval action between Irid Kharladu and Irid Arkun, or Il Re Carlo Due and Il Re d'Aragon, which no doubt gave him cause for thought. Upon reaching Rome, where he heard of the death of the Pope (Honorius IV), he was received by twelve great lords *Kardinale*, who were assembled to elect his successor. Realising that he had to await the election of the new Pontiff before commencing negotiations, the *Rabban* traversed Thuzkan, or Tuscany, to Ginuha, or Genoa, where he noticed its democratic government. From Genoa he proceeded to the court of the King of France at Paris, and gives an excellent account of its university, even if he exaggerated somewhat as to its thirty thousand students.

From Paris he travelled southwards to the court of King Alangitar in Karsonia. This was Edward I, who was then holding his court in Gascony. King Edward welcomed Bar-soma warmly and, upon the *Rabban* declaring the proposals of Arghun for a simultaneous attack on the Holy Land from the east and from the west, declared: 'We, the Kings of these regions, have placed the emblem of the Cross on our bodies, and are deeply interested in this question. My heart rejoices to learn that what I desire, King Arghun also desires.' It is recorded



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that King Edward received the sacrament at the hands of Bar-soma, whom he dismissed with gifts and a favourable reply.

Upon returning to Rome, the *Rabban* received Communion, on Palm Sunday 1288, from Nicholas IV, the newly elected Pope, who sent a papal tiara to the Patriarch *Mar Yaballaha* as a mark of fraternal affection. Furthermore, with the approval of His Holiness, Bar-soma celebrated the Nestorian Eucharist in Rome in the presence of a large congregation of Catholics. He then returned to Baghdad at the end of 1288.

Edward was anxious to fulfil his engagement and undertake another campaign in Syria, but the Scottish wars made this impossible at the time. Arghun sent two more envoys to Europe, but the capture of Acre in 1291 sealed the fate of the Latin Kingdom and put an end to all hopes of recapturing the Holy City. Before, however, ending our account of this period, a brief mention is called for of the return mission despatched by Edward I to Arghun Khan in 1291. It was despatched under Galfridus de Langele, who joined the *Ilkhan's* ambassador, Buscarello de Ghizolfi, a Genoese, in Italy and accompanied him to Trebizond, where the land journey commenced. The main caravan route was followed to the Persian court at Tabriz. Unfortunately little more has come down to us than an account of the mission's expenses, but falcons were among the gifts sent and the returning ambassador brought back a leopard in a cage for Edward I.

The most notable of Marco Polo's successors were missionaries, chief of whom was John de Monte Corvino.<sup>1</sup> After spending some fourteen years in the Near East, Friar John

<sup>1</sup> For this chapter I have consulted Beazley, *op. cit.*, and Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*.

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returned to Europe and reported to the Pope his high hopes of the conversion of Arghun Khan. The Pope, who was much pleased with this information, sent back Corvino to Asia with letters to Arghun, to Kubilai and even to Kaidu, the Mongol Chief of Turkestan and Kubilai's bitter enemy.

Leaving Tabriz with 'a great merchant Peter of Lucolongo', in 1291, Corvino made his way across Persia to Hormuz and, in due course, reached Malabar and so to Maabar. At St. Thomas's Shrine he spent just over one year, winning one hundred converts. In an interesting letter, which has been preserved, he refers to the long duration of the monsoons, this being the first definite account of these seasonal winds to be reported.

We next hear of Corvino in a letter dated January 1305. In it he writes that, for eleven years, he has worked quite alone in Cathay but that he had recently been joined by Friar Arnold of Cologne. He had, however, not laboured in vain since he had made a convert of the Nestorian Prince George, a scion 'of the family of Prester John of India'. Thanks to his financial support, he had built a splendid church, 'called the Roman church', at a place twenty days' journey from Peking, possibly in the province of Tenduc. But, on the death of his patron, he regretted to report that his followers returned to the Nestorian faith.

In 1305 Corvino again writes: 'I have built a church in the city of Cambaliech, in which the King has his chief residence. This I completed six years ago. . . . Also I have gradually bought one hundred and fifty boys, the children of pagan parents. . . . Eleven of the boys already know our service, and form a choir. . . . His Majesty the Emperor moreover delights much



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to hear them chaunting.' This letter resulted in Corvino being appointed Archbishop of Cambaluc, while seven other Franciscans were appointed to be his suffragan bishops, three of whom died on the way. Archbishop John died in 1328 and he had no successor at Cambaluc.

It is as well to point out, before quitting this subject, that although the *Khákans* visited Christian churches and were present at their ceremonies, they did as much for the Shamanists, Buddhists and Moslems, to whose spiritual leaders were accorded similar privileges. Actually they felt that it might benefit them to have the prayers of the holy men of all religions, but, beyond this, their attitude was one of indifference. It remains to add that, when the Mongols were driven out of China, Latin Christianity, which rested on their support and patronage, disappeared from China, which entered into a period of strict seclusion.

The best known of the successors of Marco Polo was Friar Odoric of Pordenone. Imbued with a passion for travelling, this worthy Franciscan started on his journeys in Asia about 1317 and returned to Italy from distant Cathay in 1330. He commences his story at Trebizond, and, first of all, spent some years at the houses of his Order at Tabriz and Sultania. Then, bound for Cathay, he crossed Persia and, sailing from Hormuz, now situated on an island, landed at Tana, the scene of the martyrdom of four friars. Oderic collected their bones and, continuing his voyage, landed in Sumatra, where he gave the first account of the deadly blow-pipe with its 'iron poisoned bodkin'.

Upon reaching Cathay: 'The first city I came to was called Censcalan [Sinkalan or Canton] and 'tis a city as big as three

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Venices. . . . Indeed all Italy hath not the amount of craft that this one city hath.' At Zaitun he mentions the existence of two houses of minor friars, 'and there I deposited the bones of our friars who suffered martyrdom for the faith of Jesus Christ'.

Continuing his wanderings, Odoric gives the first account of fishing with cormorants, which certainly merits quotation: 'I looked and saw in some boats that there were certain water-fowl tied upon perches. And these my host now tied with a cord round the throat that they might not be able to swallow the fish which they caught. Next he proceeded to put three great baskets into a boat . . . and then he let the water-fowl loose. Straightway they began to dive into the water, catching large numbers of fish, and ever as they caught them putting them of their own accord into the baskets, so that before long all the three baskets were full.' It is not generally known that cormorants were formerly used in the Chinese manner for fishing in England and Holland and that Charles II had a 'Master of the Cormorants'.

Of Kinsay the Friar writes: "'Tis the greatest city in the whole world, so great indeed that I should scarcely venture to tell of it, but that I have met at Venice people in plenty who have been there'. His description fully corroborates that of Marco Polo, but surely he exaggerates the number of travellers to Cathay.

Odoric visited Chilenfu (Nanking) with 'some three hundred and sixty stone bridges, finer than the whole world can show'. He terms the Yangtse, the Talay, this Mongol word signifying 'the sea', which in the form Dalai is the figurative title of the Grand Lama of Tibet. He also mentions Iamzai, the Yangui, of which city Marco had been governor. In this city, he writes, 'our minor friars have a house. And here also be three churches



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of the Nestorians.' Travelling northwards, Odoric terms the Hoang-ho the Caramoran, as did Marco, and 'it doth great damage when it breaks its banks, just as the Po does by Ferrara'.

Odoric resided at Khan-baliq for three years, and his excellent descriptions of the court and its ceremonies, of the *Khákan* and his wealth, fully corroborate the account given by the great Venetian, and are on that account alone of considerable value.

Odoric's description of his return journey to Europe is unfortunately most meagre. He traversed the country of Prester John, and travelling thence he came 'unto a certain province which is called Kansan, and that is the second best province in the world and the best populated'. Here we are at Marco's Kenjanfu, the capital of Shansi. When the Friar continued his travels and traversed Tibet, there is no definite route that can be traced, but Odoric undoubtedly visited Lhasa, 'the chief and royal city all built with walls of black and white, and all its streets are very well paved'. Probably he followed the main caravan route so dramatically described by Huc and Gabet. His description of the funeral rites in which the corpse is cut to pieces and eaten by vultures is certainly true.

Before leaving Tibet, Odoric harks back to China and notes: 'Moreover 'tis the mark of gentility in that country to have the nails long; and some let their thumb-nails grow to such an extent that they grow round the hand. And with the women the great beauty is to have little feet; and for this reason mothers are accustomed, as soon as girls are born to them, to swathe their feet tightly so that they can never grow in the least.'

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I hope that a custom which makes a man unable to defend himself and the still worse custom of 'golden lilies' are now things of the past, but they were certainly noticeable at Kashgar twenty years ago.

From Tibet, the Friar next gives a description of the great Buddhist statue at Bamian, which 'was as it were the face of a man very great and terrible, so very terrible indeed that for my exceeding fear, my spirit seemed to die in me'. From Bamian he travelled west and the last district he described was Millestorte, the home of the Old Man of the Mountain, at Alamut to the north-east of Kazvin. He died shortly after his return, and 'in the year of the Lord's Incarnation, MCCCXXXI, he passed triumphantly from this world to the glories of the blessed'. Peace be with him!

So far in this work no account has been given of a friendly mission from the *Khdkan* to Europe. But Toghan Timur Ukhagatu, the last of the Mongol rulers in Peking, despatched an embassy which was received by the Pope Benedict in 1338. The Tartar emperor asked for the Papal benediction. He especially commended the Christian Alans and expressed his desire for friendly intercourse. He finally asked for horses and other marvels of the lands of the sunset. The Alans, in a separate letter, begged His Holiness to appoint and send a worthy successor to John de Corvino, who, they stated, had been dead for eight years, during which period the flock had been without guide or spiritual consolation.

The return embassy, of which John Marignolli was the leading figure, travelled across Asia through Kulja and Hami and reached Cambaluc in 1342. There the mission remained for four years, receiving royal hospitality throughout the period.



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It returned to Europe by the same sea route as that followed by the Polos and finally reached Avignon in 1353.

We have now reached the end of this wonderful period, during which European missionaries and merchants resided in China for long periods. The Yuen dynasty, founded by Kubilai, declined in power and prestige after his death until, in 1368, Chu Yuen Chang, the founder of the Ming dynasty, assumed the royal title and, two years later, the Mongols were driven out of China, back to their homeland.

It may be worth while, by way of concluding this chapter, to look back and see how the Tartars played their part before the curtain falls, shutting alike the land-gate and the water-gate, both of which the illustrious Marco Polo had opened. In Europe, only the horrors of the Mongol invasion are remembered, the first period of destruction. And yet the massacres perpetrated by the Vikings were as horrible, but, once they had settled down, they became rulers and leaders of Christendom. And so it was with the Mongols. Reading Marco's account of the reign of Kubilai, it is impossible not to compare his tolerance with that of Akbar, while there is nothing but praise for the *Khákan's* care for his subjects, his zeal for good order and for good and safe communications. Indeed, in many ways he was a model ruler. As a result, never before in the course of history could merchants cross Asia in such safety; and when the Mongol dynasty fell, all intercourse with Europe ceased, and the wonders of Cathay and Manji became mere legends. A century and a half passes and when the curtain again rises, owing to the conquest by Portugal and Spain of the Indies and the Spice Islands, European ships appear in Chinese ports. Everywhere the old order had yielded place to the new,

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even in the name of the country. Yet, to the student, the reign of Kubilai will always be remembered as a Golden Age, rivalling, if not surpassing, that of Harun al-Rashid, the celebrated Caliph of Baghdad.



CHAPTER XVI

THE QUEST FOR CATHAY ACROSS THE ARCTIC

It is to be had in minde, that you use all wayes and meanes possible to  
learne howe men may passe from Russia, either by land or sea to Cathaia.

Russia Company's Articles

And Christian Merchants, that with Russian stems  
Plow up huge furrowes in the Caspian Sea,  
Shall vaile to us, as Lords of al the Lake.

MARLOWE, *Tamburlaine the Great*, Act I, Scene 2

Anthony Jenkinson was the first Englishman that sayled on the Caspian  
Sea, and pierced to the Bactrians.

CAMDEN's *Annals*, 1567



## CHAPTER XVI

### THE QUEST FOR CATHAY ACROSS THE ARCTIC

THE epoch-making voyage of Columbus to Cuba and Haiti in 1492 and the discovery of the New World lie outside the scope of this work, although it may be mentioned that Columbus at first thought that Cuba 'must be the mainland, the province of Catayo [Cathay]', while he told his officers that Haiti (which he subsequently named Espanola) was Chipangu or Japan.

To secure the exclusive rights of Spain and Portugal, in 1494, by the Treaty of Tordesillas the two powers accepted a line drawn three hundred and seventy leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands as the line of demarcation between the two states. They thereby divided the world outside Europe between themselves, and threatened severe penalties to all intruders.

This monstrous treaty was challenged by England and other powers when they were strong enough to do so. A small movement in this direction was proved by the patent of Henry VII, issued in 1496, by the terms of which John Cabot was to sail under the English flag 'to all parts, regions and coasts of the eastern, western, and northern sea'. His discoveries, it was stipulated, must be of 'heathen islands or countries hitherto unknown to Christians' and they had to be made in the latitude of England. Incidentally this last stipulation led to some interesting 'political' surveys.<sup>1</sup> As we know, Cabot sailed on his first voyage in 1497 and probably struck the New World at Cape

<sup>1</sup> *Vide Sykes, History of Exploration*, p. 125.

## *The Quest for Cathay*

Breton, which he considered to be situated somewhat to the north of Cathay. In two voyages, the explorer discovered Nova Scotia and probably penetrated as far south as Cape Cod, but he was careful to show the coast running east and west in order to remain within the limits of the patent. He also discovered Newfoundland. However, he had entirely failed to establish a profitable trade with the Spice Islands, as had been hoped, and so, although the rich cod fisheries were visited by the fishing fleets of Europe, the land discoveries were temporarily abandoned.

Sebastian Cabot followed in his father's footsteps as an explorer, and undertook a voyage to the Arctic in 1508-9, which led to his being regarded as the leading authority on the subject.

In 1527 Robert Thorne, who had lived for many years at Seville, addressed Henry VIII in a most important declaration which points out 'that with a small number of ships there may bee discovered diverse New lands and kingdomes. . . . To which places there is left one way to discover, which is into the North: for that of the foure partes of the worlde, it seemeth three parts are discovered by other Princes . . . and considering well the courses, truely the danger and way is shorter to us than to Spain or Portingall, as by evident reasons appereth'.<sup>1</sup>

It was not until the reign of Edward VI that an important attempt was made to reach Cathay across the Arctic. The merchants especially favoured the scheme, if it were practicable, since Cathay was a cold country, and so it was hoped that English cloth would find a market there and thus provide

<sup>1</sup> *Hakluyt's Voyages*, vol. ii, pp. 161-2 (Maclehose edition).



## *The Quest for Cathay across the Arctic*

money for the purchase of spices in the Spice Islands. A company of Merchant-Adventurers was formed and, in 1553, Sebastian Cabot drew up remarkably complete Ordinances as 'governour of the mysterie and companie of the Marchants adventurers for the discoverie of Regions, Dominions, Islands and places unknownen'.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of that year Sir Hugh Willoughby and Richard Chancellor, duly furnished with letters of credence signed by Edward VI, sailed from Deptford, with a 'fleete' of three ships, that of the Admiral being of one hundred and twenty tons burden. Before striking the coast of Norway, Willoughby disappeared in a storm and both he and his crew finally perished of cold on the coast of Lapland.

The third ship was also lost, but Chancellor, who ranked as 'Captaine, and Pilot major of the fleete', in accordance with instructions, shaped his course for Wardhouse (Vardö) in Norway. There, after waiting in vain for his consorts, he decided to continue the voyage. 'Master Chanceler', we are told, 'held on his course towards that unknownen part of the world, and sailed so farre, that he came at last to the place where he found no night at all, but a continuall light and brightnesse of the Sunne shining clearly upon the huge and mightie Sea . . . and, at length it pleased God to bring them into a certaine great Bay, which was of one hundreth miles or thereabout over'.<sup>2</sup>

Gaining contact with the barbarous inhabitants, Chancellor learned that 'the Countrey was called Russia, or Moscovie and that Ivan Vasiliwich (which was at that time their King's

<sup>1</sup> *Hakluyt's Voyages*, vol. ii, p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> *Hakluyt's Voyages*, vol. ii, p. 248. A chart of Wardhouse is given opposite p. 416.

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name) ruled and governed farre and wide in those places'. In due course Ivan the Terrible, as he was termed, invited the English captain to visit him at Moscow, where he was most hospitably received, and in this manner was inaugurated a most valuable trade in furs, timber, flax, hemp and tallow.

In the following year Chancellor sailed for England with letters from Ivan to Edward VI, promising every facility to the English. King Edward had meanwhile died, but Queen Mary, in 1555-6, granted a charter to the Merchant-Adventurers under the title of the 'Muscovy or Russian Company', and Chancellor, returning to Russia, carried through with complete success negotiations by which the English were granted a trade monopoly in the White Sea. In 1556 this capable envoy set sail once again for England in charge of the first Russian ambassador to the English court. Two of the four ships were lost. The ship in which Chancellor and the ambassador sailed was wrecked on the coast of Scotland, and Chancellor was among the drowned. To him was due the discovery of the White Sea and the foundation of a valuable trade with Russia, while his reports on the country were excellent. He certainly ranks among the great pioneers of the period.

His successor, Anthony Jenkinson, was an experienced traveller who had seen Sulayman the Magnificent enter Aleppo in 1553. He was also a skilful navigator and surveyor. In 1557 he was appointed Captain-General of the fleet of the Muscovy Company and was received with much favour by the Emperor, who repeatedly invited him to attend the banquets, which were of an intolerable length. Jenkinson was undoubtedly anxious to carry out the Instructions which serve as a motto to this



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chapter. Fortunately he won the favour of the Emperor, and was furnished with letters 'directed unto sundry Kings and Princes, by those dominions I should pass'.<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 1558 he started on his long journey to Bokhara in the double rôle of envoy of Ivan and of a merchant.

Travelling by water to Nijni Novgorod, he there awaited the arrival of the newly appointed Governor of Astrakhan, who was in command of a flotilla of 'five hundred greate boates, some laden with souldiers and munition, and other some with merchandise'. Jenkinson gives an interesting description of the mighty Volga—it is a mile wide at inland Samara where I crossed it—which he was the first Englishman to explore, and in due course reached Kazan. Here he notes: 'Cazan is a fayre towne, after the Russe or Tartar fashion, with a strong castle, situated upon a high hill, and was walled round about with timber and earth, but now the Emperour of Russia hath given order to plucke downe the olde walles and to build them again of free stone'. After a fortnight's halt at Kazan, the voyage was resumed and our traveller describes the nomadic Nagayan in some detail: 'Come they sow not, neither doe eat any bread, mocking the Christians for the same, and disabling our strengths, saying we live by eating the top of a weed, and drinke a drinke made of the same'. Astrakhan was reached in mid-July and Jenkinson described it as being a 'walled town with a strongly fortified castle, and the furthest hold that this Emperour of Russia hath conquered of the Tartars toward the Caspian Sea. . . . There is a certaine trade of merchandize there vsed, but as yet so small and beggerly, that it is not woorth

<sup>1</sup> This section is mainly based on *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, edited by E. Delmar Morgan and C. H. Coote for the Hakluyt Society.

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the making mention, and yet there come merchantes thither from divers places.' At the time of his visit the city presented a deplorable picture with hundreds of Nagayans dead or dying of hunger owing to a famine which was followed by a plague epidemic. Children were offered for sale at the price of a loaf of bread, and Jenkinson bought a girl, Aura Soltana, whom he presented to the Queen upon his return to England.

Purchasing a vessel, the dauntless Englishman continued his voyage, entering the Caspian Sea at some thirty miles below Astrakhan. Surveying its eastern coast, he reached the mouth of the river Yake—the *Iaë* of Carpini—which was later known as the Ural. There, 'all our men being on lande, saving I who laye sore sicke', some pirates boarded the vessel on the pretence of searching for infidels. However, a passenger called Azy (*Haji*) 'most stoutly answered, that there were none, avowing the same by great oathes of their lawe, whom the rouers beleaved, and vpon his words departed'.

Owing to bad weather, Jenkinson landed at a small port opposite Mangishlak. Arranging to hire camels was no light task among these Turkoman—as was also my own experience some three centuries later. 'We founde them to bee very bad and brutish people, for they ceased not dayly to molest vs, either by fighting, stealing or begging, raying the price of horse and camels, and victuals double, that the wont was there to bee.'

There was also a serious risk of being plundered by the Chief of Mangishlak, but, thanks to a visit paid to him by Jenkinson, who probably explained his reasons for not landing at that port, this danger was averted. Jenkinson was thus free to join a caravan of merchants with their transport consisting of one











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thousand camels, in their march across the desert to Urganj. The water was brackish and scanty at that, while his own following of necessity ate a camel and a horse. After drinking this brackish water for twenty-three days, sweet water was reached again at a lake which Jenkinson, as his map proves, erroneously considered to be a gulf of the Caspian. Actually it was a lake situated in the bed of the Oxus, which had comparatively recently changed its course and discharged into the Sea of Kitai, as the Sea of Aral was termed.

The first town to be reached beyond the desert was Sellizure, to be identified with Shahr-i-Vazir, or 'The City of the Vizier'. There Jenkinson was well received and was feasted 'with flesh of a wilde horse and mares milk without bread'. From Shahr-i-Vazir, the travellers made for Urganj. In 1220 this beautiful city, the capital of Khwarizm or Khiva, had been destroyed by the Mongols. The canal dykes were broken down and the whole city was laid under water. As a result the Oxus, or Amu Daria, returned to its ancient bed and flowed into the Caspian Sea. Some time in the sixteenth century the wayward river again changed its course and rejoined the Sir Daria in the Sea of Aral. These two rivers were termed Jayhun and Sayhun respectively by the Moslems.

Jenkinson spent a month at Urganj, which he reported to be almost in ruins. He awaited the return of Ali Sultan 'from a towne called Corozan within the borders of Persia, which hee lately had conquered from the Persians'. As a matter of fact Khorasan is a province, with Tus, and later Meshed, as its chief city.

Continuing the journey, the English explorer crossed another great river called Ardocke. Actually this was the main branch

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of the Oxus which, as he said, 'falleth into the lake of Kitay'. In his fascinating map, which has been reproduced for this work, he erroneously shows the Aral Sea to be the source of the Ob River.

An attack by a strong band of robbers took place in this neighbourhood, 'and had it not been for four hand gunnes which I and my companie had and used, we had bene overcome and destroyed . . . but after we had slaine divers of their men and horses with our gunnes, they durst not approche so nigh'. Finally the travellers bought off their assailants and 'vpon the twenty-third day of December we arrived at the citie of Boghar [Bokhara] in the lande of Bactria'.<sup>1</sup> Here Anthony Jenkinson, apparently all unaware of the fact, struck the tracks of the elder Polos.

The Englishman refers to the beautiful tiled mosques, which I have also admired, as 'sumptuously builded, and gilt, and specially bathstones so artificially built that the like thereof is not in the world'. Abdulla Khan, 'the King of Boghar', who was starting on the first of his five raiding expeditions into Khorasan, treated Jenkinson hospitably. The English envoy delivered to him 'the Emperor of *Russia* his letters', and the King, 'deuised with me familiarly, in his secret chamber, as well of the power of the Emperour and the great Turke, as also of our countries, lawes, and religion, and caused us to shoote in hand gunnes before him, and did himself practice the vse thereof'.

Abdulla Khan started off on his expedition into Khorasan without paying Jenkinson the money which he owed him. On

<sup>1</sup> Actually, as we have seen above, Bactria is the modern province of Badakhshan, with its chief city Balkh; but the term was used loosely on this occasion and also by Milton, who termed the Shah of Persia a 'Bactrian Sophi'.



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the other hand he sent a body of one hundred men to catch his assailants. Four were brought in, including two that 'were sore wounded in our skirmish with our gunners. . . . And the King caused them all four to be hanged at his palace gate, because they were Gentlemen to the example of others.' Jenkinson gives an excellent account of the trade of Bokhara with other parts of Asia, but, owing to disturbances in Central Asia and especially at Tashkent and Kashgar, 'it is impossible for any *Caravan* to pass vnspoiled, so that three yeares before our being there, no *Caravan* had gone, or vsed trade betwixt the countries of Cathaye and Boghare, and when the way is cleare, it is nine months journey'.

Jenkinson had effected his main purpose and had discovered that there was no chance of trading with Cathay by land. Having 'made his solace at *Boghar*, in the Winter time', he had intended, when the caravan season began, to visit Persia, but owing to the utter insecurity of the routes and the fact that the wares which he had been forced to accept in return for his goods instead of money, were not saleable in Persia, he decided to retrace his steps to the Caspian Sea.

Leaving Bokhara just in time to escape a siege by the King of Samarcand, on April 23, 1559, Jenkinson reached the coast in safety, accompanied by ambassadors from Bokhara, Balkh and Urganj, together with twenty-five Russian slaves whom he had liberated. His ship was awaiting him, 'albeit there was neither anker, cable, cocke,<sup>1</sup> nor saile'. Having supplied these

<sup>1</sup> A 'cocke' or cock-boat appears in *King Lear*.

'The fishmen that walk upon the beach  
Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark  
Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy  
Almost too small for sight.'

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deficiencies, Jenkinson in due course reported to Ivan the Terrible at Moscow and returned to England.

Jenkinson's voyage to Persia lies outside the scope of this work and it remains to sum up the results of this great journey in which he bridges over the era of the Polos and those of English and Russian travellers of the eighteenth century. His valuable discoveries were embodied by geographers, and he gave a mass of accurate information about the peoples, the trade and the politics of Central Asia and Persia. Perhaps he reveals himself best of all in his statement: 'Note, that during the time of our navigation, wee sette vppe the redde crosse of S. George, in our flagges, for honour of the Christians, which I suppose was never seene in the *Caspian* sea before'. To conclude this brief account of the first great English land explorer, Milton surely relied on Jenkinson for the information contained in the lines:

As when the Tartar from his Russian foe,  
By Astracan, over the snowy plains,  
Retires, or Bactrian Sophi, from the horns  
Of Turkish crescent, leaves all waste beyond  
The realm of Aladule, in his retreat  
To Tauris or Casbeen.

To return to the explorers by sea. In the spring of 1536, Steven Burrough, who had been master of Chancellor's ship in the first voyage, made a most successful attempt to penetrate farther eastward towards Cathay. By the end of May he was off North Cape, 'which I so named for the first voyage', and then coasted south-eastwards across the Cronian Sea, as Pliny termed it, to the Kola River, where 'there came aboard of us one of the Russe Lodiaes rowing with twentie oares, and there were foure and twentie men in her. The master of the boate presented me with a greate loafe of bread, and sixe ringes of



## *The Quest for Cathay across the Arctic*

bread, which they call Colaches<sup>1</sup> . . . and I gave unto the master of the boate, a combe, and a small glasse: and he declared unto me, that he was bound to Pechora, and after that I made them to drinke, the tide being somewhat broken, they gently departed.'

While riding at anchor in the Kola some thirty of these *lodiaes* came down the river and the master of one of them, called Gabriel, 'shewed me very much friendship, and he declared unto me, that all were bound to Pechora, a fishing for Salmons, and Morses . . . so that I was glad of their company'. The dangerous Pechora bar was crossed with much difficulty and the explorer 'went on shoare and observed the variation of the Compasse'. He also took the latitude.

Continuing the adventurous voyage, on July 31 'we were at an anker among the Islands of Vaigats'. Burrough there met Samoyedes and described their idols: 'which were in number above three hundred, the worst and the most unartificial worke that I ever saw: the eyes and mouthes of sundrie of them were bloodie, they had the shape of men, women and children, very grosly wrought. . . . Their knowledge is very base for they know no letter.' He adds, 'for their cariages they have no other beastes to serve them, but Deere only'. Storms were almost continuous, and on August 22 we read: "The latitude this day at noone was seventy degrees and a terce, we sounded heere, and had nine and forty fadomes and oze, which oze signified that we drew towards Nova Zembla. . . . And thus we being out of al hope to discover any more to the Eastward this yeere wee thought it best to returne, and that for three

<sup>1</sup> This closely resembles the modern Russian word for bread. Vide *op. cit.* vol. ii, pp. 322-44.

## *The Quest for Cathay*

causes. The first, the continuall Northeast and Northerly winds, which have more power after a man is past to the Eastwards of Caninoze, then in any place that I doe know in these Northerly regions. Second, because of the great and terrible abundance of ice which we saw with our eies, and we doubt greater store abideth in thos parts: I adventured already somewhat to farre in it, but I thanke God for my safe deliverance from it. Third, because the nights waxed darke, and the winter began to draw on with his stormes: and therefore I resolved to take the first best wind that God should send, and plie towards the bay of S. Nicholas, and to see if we might do any good there, if God would permit it.'<sup>1</sup>

To conclude, Burrough wintered in the Kola Peninsula. In the following summer he was ordered to search for some missing ships and was consequently unable to attempt to reach the river Ob, as he had hoped. Further efforts were made to penetrate eastwards, and it appears that Anthony Marsh despatched some Russian members of his staff to the Ob, who reached it by land in 1584.

There were also other expeditions, which resulted in the discovery and partial exploration of Novaya Zemlya and of Spitsbergen, but the furthest point eastwards reached by sea was Vaigats. It is worth pointing out that in the map of Ortelius, published in 1570, and in other maps of the period, a clear passage is shown running due east along the northern coast of Asia. Actually our heroic navigators had barely traversed one-quarter of the enormous distance from Cape North to Bering Strait. Nevertheless, if they had failed, they had failed gloriously.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* vol. ii, p. 342.



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This chapter may suitably be concluded by a second quotation from Milton, which epitomises the position:

As when two polar winds, blowing adverse  
Upon the Cronian sea, together drive  
Mountains of ice, that stop the imagin'd way,  
Beyond Petsora eastward, to the rich  
Cathaian coast.





CHAPTER XVII

PORTUGAL DISCOVERS THE OCEAN ROUTE TO CHINA

To their triumphant arms, the Chersonese  
In golden treasures rich, distant Cathay,  
And all the farthest islands of the East,  
And all the seas, to them shall homage pay.

CAMOENS, *The Lusiad*

The Captain of the ship carried the compass with the magnet after our manner, and had a chart which was all marked with lines, perpendicular and across. My companions asked the Christians: 'Now that we have lost the north star, how does he steer us? Is there any other north star than this by which we steer?' . . . The Captain showed us four or five stars among which was one which he said was opposite to our north star, and stated that he sailed by the north because the magnet was adjusted and subjected to our north. He also told us that towards the south there are some other races, who navigate by the said four or five stars opposite to us; and moreover they said that beyond the said island the day does not last more than four hours, and that there it was colder than in any other part of the world.

LUDOVICO DI VARTHEMA



## CHAPTER XVII

### PORTUGAL DISCOVERS THE OCEAN ROUTE TO CHINA

THE discovery of the New World almost simultaneously with that of the Ocean route to the East at the end of the fifteenth century, constituted epoch-making events which have dwarfed all preceding feats of mankind in history. They finally freed Europe from fear of Moslem domination and brought into existence the modern world with its power, its civilisation and its wealth.

Before describing the latter of these momentous discoveries I propose to make a rapid survey of the situation in Asia and Europe. The expulsion of the Mongols from China, which ended their power and influence in Asia, has been described in Chapter XV. In Central Asia and Persia, Tamerlane shattered and annexed the kingdoms ruled by the descendants of Chengiz Khan and established a great Moslem kingdom in Central Asia, which his descendants held for some generations. In spite of the overthrow of the Mongol Empire, which had inflicted such calamities on Eastern Europe, and which still ruled Russia, albeit with weakening force, the situation in Europe was more alarming than at any other period since the opening of the second millennium owing to the terrible threat of the Osmanli Turks. Descendants of a Turkish tribe which had fled from the neighbourhood of Merv before the hordes of Chengiz Khan, they had risen to power early in the fourteenth century and, crossing into Europe, had, under Bayazid the 'Thunderbolt', worsted the Servians and their Christian allies in the stricken

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field of Kossovo (1389), and, seven years later, had shattered the chivalry of Europe at Nicopolis. The defeat and capture of Bayazid by Tamerlane in 1402 checked the advance of the Turks for a generation, but they finally captured Constantinople, that great barrier-city of European civilisation, in 1453, and their empire, supported by the only regular army in existence, threatened to conquer independent Europe, where the Holy Roman Empire was breaking up.

Again, the bitter rivalry of the Italian Sea-states had opened the way for the Turkish navy, which dominated the eastern Mediterranean and continued to threaten the sea-power of Christendom until at the fateful battle of Lepanto, fought in the Gulf of Patras in 1571, the Turks were vanquished. While the Turks in Eastern Europe were thus advancing in Western Europe towards the walls of Vienna, but not to final victory, the Christians of Spain and Portugal were gradually driving the Moslems out of Europe. The capture of Granada in 1492 ended this long series of campaigns and gave the first distinct proof of the renaissance of Western Europe.

It is given to a few men to inaugurate a new era, but this was emphatically accomplished by Prince Henry the Navigator, grandson of John of Gaunt, who by his life's work initiated the series of voyages that brought the modern world into existence. Portugal, if poor and thinly populated, was fortunate in the possession of a coast-line some three hundred miles in length, with several deep and sheltered harbours. She also possessed a population which lived mainly on the harvest of the sea. Prince Henry transformed these fishermen into skilled navigators and seamen, engaging the services of the best navigators of Italy and Sicily for the task. He also built decked ships of 200 tons,



## *Portugal discovers the Ocean Route to China*

with three or four masts, that were suitable for long ocean voyages. The only feat of arms of this great prince was the capture of Ceuta, but this success gave him a commanding position in the Atlantic Ocean which the Moors could not challenge. Indeed, in spite of the strong maritime power of the Moslems of Morocco, they carried on their trade across the Sahara to Ghana in the Senegal valley by camel caravans and did not attempt to navigate the Atlantic Ocean. Ghana appears in the famous map of Idrisi, which was constructed in about 1150 for King Roger II of Sicily, and our 'guineas' were named from its gold.

The earliest voyages which Prince Henry despatched down the arid west coast of Africa were not successful, since master and mariners alike believed that if they passed Cape Bojador the currents were so terrible that no ship could possibly return. However, after twelve years of exploration, the fateful Cape was passed, and when the great Prince Navigator died in 1260 his captains had explored beyond the river Gambia and had become the best-trained and most experienced navigators in Europe. Gradually the west coast of Africa was followed down until, in 1488, great Bartholomew Diaz set up a *padrao* or stone pillar at Angra Pequena, a fragment of which I inspected at Cape Town. On continuing the voyage and finding the currents adverse beyond that point, Diaz put out to sea for thirteen days, and on February 3, 1488, landed at Mossel Bay. He had rounded Africa and proved without doubt that the Indies could be reached by sea.

Vasco da Gama<sup>1</sup> was selected to complete the task of his pre-

<sup>1</sup> I have based this section on Correa's *Lendas da India*, translated by Hon. Henry Stanley, Hakluyt Society, 1869; and on *The First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, by E. G. Ravenstein. This latter work, based on the translation of the *Roteiro*, or 'Journal', is of considerable value. It also belongs to the publications of the Hakluyt Society, and the two works complement one another.

## *The Quest for Cathay*

decessors. Two specially constructed ships, each of 120 tons, together with a store-ship of 200 tons and a *caravel* of 50 tons, composed the squadron which sailed on its momentous mission in July 1497. Da Gama, who was accompanied by pilots of the expedition of Diaz, boldly struck out into the Atlantic from the Cape Verde Islands, and, after having been out of sight of land for more than three months, during which he had sailed over four thousand miles, struck the African coast near Santa Helena Bay to the north of the modern Cape Town. Doubling the Cape of Good Hope with difficulty, da Gama, after dealing promptly with an attempt at mutiny, refitted two ships and burned a third, at Mossel Bay, which he named the River of Mercy.

Upon continuing the voyage, the captain-major, as he is termed, sailed past the Rio de Infante (now the Great Fish River), which marked the furthest point reached by Diaz. However, hereabouts the Agulhas current became too strong for him and he was carried back to Santa Cruz, an island situated in Algoa Bay. Fortunately a strong southerly wind set in which enabled him to make due progress northwards once again. He had about eight hundred miles of unexplored coast to pass before reaching the Moslem ports, of which he had heard, where he hoped to secure pilots for the onward voyage to India.

Sofala was passed by a mistake in the night, but, at the end of March 1498, the Portuguese sailed into the harbour of Mozambique. There they found four Arab vessels 'laden with gold, silver, cloves, pepper, ginger and silver rings, as also with quantities of pearls, jewels, and rubies'. They had gained touch with the 'gorgeous East'. However, as soon as it was realised that the newcomers were Christians, marked hostility was displayed and the watering parties were attacked. In spite of this



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and other troubles, da Gama secured two Arab pilots who were acquainted with the use of the compass, the quadrant, and of charts, and sailed on to Mombasa. There again the hostility of the ruler was even more marked, and the treacherous Arab pilots attempted to 'cast the ships on the banks at the entrance to the harbour'. That plot having failed, an attempt was made by swimmers to cut the cables and board the ships, but 'these and other wicked tricks practised upon us by these dogs, our Lord did not allow to succeed because they were unbelievers'.

At neighbouring Malindi they were treated in the most friendly manner, possibly because the king was descended from a Shiraz family<sup>1</sup> and, as a Shia Moslem, was hostile to his neighbours. However that may be, he showed himself genuinely helpful and was especially pleased with da Gama, who released the passengers of a ship and their property which he had seized on the high seas. The king visited both ships and was astonished at their powerful artillery and at 'the quarter-decks decked out with figured stuffs of Flanders and carpets and rugs; and the lances in stands with the points cleaned, and the naked swords and white weapons hung up, with splendid breast plates and the arms of the captains; and a buffet was set up with its plate, and attendants very splendidly dressed'. There is a proverb which runs, 'Fill the eyes of a Persian', and it is true throughout Asia and, for that matter, also in Africa.

When the king gave a display on the sea-front, there were, among other instruments in his band, 'two trumpets of ivory richly carved, and of the size of a man'. These royal trumpets

<sup>1</sup> When I voyaged down this coast some thirty years ago, I was warmly welcomed by the descendants of these Shiraz families, merely as 'the consul from Persia'—so anxious were they for news of their homeland.

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were peculiar to the cities ruled by these Persians of Shiraz, who had settled on the coast in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

After spending some sixteen days at Malindi, the last section of this historical voyage was undertaken with a 'Christian' pilot—he was actually a Hindu, provided by the friendly ruler of Malindi. Sailing on April 24, on May 18 'we sighted lofty mountains' and having all the time sailed before the wind we could not have made less than 600 leagues'. Finally, on May 20, 1498, this great feat of discovering the Ocean route to India was brought to a successful conclusion off Calicut, where, *mirabile dictu*, the Portuguese were greeted by two Moors of Tunis who spoke Castilian.

The first European explorer, after the golden period of the Yuan dynasty, to visit Malacca was Ludovico di Varthema of Bologna, whose travels, which included the unknown Spice Islands, combined with his flair for collecting information, rendered his reports of the greatest service to Europe in general and to Portugal in particular.<sup>2</sup>

A soldier and adventurer, we find him in the spring of 1503 at Damascus, where he was spending some months in studying Arabic. He was most anxious to visit Mecca and, with this object in view, cultivated the friendship of the captain of the Mamelukes of the Pilgrim Caravan, who was a Christian renegade. By means of money and presents Varthema persuaded this officer to enrol him, 'so that he clothed me like a Mameluke and gave me a good horse'. The caravan included

<sup>1</sup> Probably Mount Dely, termed 'The Kingdom of Eli' by Marco Polo.

<sup>2</sup> For this section I have consulted *Ludovico di Varthema*, edited by Sir Richard Temple, Argonaut Press, 1928.



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thirty-five thousand camels and some forty thousand men and women, while there were only sixty Mamelukes to guard it. The journey was estimated to take forty days, and the plan that was usually adopted was to march a stage taking twenty hours to accomplish by the camels, to be followed by a halt of twenty-four hours when a well was reached. On the thirteenth day Varthema noted: 'we found the valley of Sodom and Gomorrah. Verily the scriptures do not lie, for one sees how they were destroyed by a miracle of God.' Actually, although the caravan route passed not very far from the Dead Sea, Varthema here mistook natural bluffs, worn by wind and rain until, to quote Scott, they

Form'd turret, dome, or battlement,  
Or seemed fantastically set  
With cupola or minaret.

Further on 'there came twenty-four thousand Arabs, who said we must pay for their water. We answered that we could not pay, for the water was given by God.' The enormous sum of twelve hundred ducats of gold was apparently subscribed by the merchants, but the Arabs were not satisfied. Consequently, aided by the armed travellers, the Mamelukes defeated the Arabs, killing sixteen hundred persons and only losing 'one man and one lady killed'. Varthema certainly did not understate the prowess of the Mamelukes or the losses of the Arabs!

To continue his account: 'At the end of eight days we found a mountain [Khaibar] which appeared to be ten or twelve miles in circumference . . . inhabited by Jews, who go naked, and are more black than any colour. . . . If they can get a Moor into their hands, they skin him alive.' It is interesting to note that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, attacked the Jews of

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Khaibar, whose chief Marhab was slain by Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet; this fight is often portrayed by Persian artists. When Doughty visited Khaibar towards the end of the nineteenth century the Jews had disappeared. Probably they had been massacred.

At Medina we gain an idea of the celebrated mosque, 'being about one hundred paces long, and eighty wide . . . with 400 columns made of burnt stone, all whitened. . . . At the head of the Mosque there is a square tower and in an underground pit is the sepulchre of Muhammad'—and his immediate successors.

After mentioning two more fights with fifty thousand Arabs, Varthema brings us to Mecca and gives the first account by a European of the *Kaaba*, which he describes as 'a very beautiful temple, similar to the Colosseum of Rome'. He also describes the various ceremonies. But he is more interested in the enormous number of pilgrims from Ethiopia, India, Persia and Syria. He next describes the jewels, spices, cotton, silk, wax and odoriferous substances, but he is told that the Portuguese had prevented the usual supply of spices from reaching the market.

Anxious to continue his travels by joining the returning Indian caravan, Varthema made friends with a Moor. He professed strong anti-Christian sentiments, and persuaded him to conceal him until the departure of the Syrian caravan. This extremely risky scheme succeeded, and Varthema, joining the Indian caravan, duly reached Jeddah, where he arranged for a passage to Persia, and, sailing down the Red Sea, he landed at Aden. Here his troubles began, since he was recognised as a Christian and thrown into irons. A day or two later 'forty or sixty Moors, belonging to two or three ships which had been



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captured by the Portuguese, and who had escaped by swimming . . . ran to the palace in the greatest fury, with arms in their hands to slay us'. However, he was defended by the guards and was then sent to the camp of the Sultan, who was about to invade Yemen. He was finally released through the interest taken in him by one of the Sultan's wives who, according to his account, was deeply enamoured of him. He then travelled by way of Lahaj to Sanaa, the capital of Yemen: 'situated on the top of a very large mountain and extremely strong'. He next visited Taiz, celebrated for its rose-water, and finally returned to Aden.

Secretly boarding a vessel loaded with madder for the Indian market, Varthema's captain was forced by the weather to put into Zeila, the Adulis of Cosmas Indicopleustes,<sup>1</sup> and destined, some three centuries later, to be the British base for an Abyssinian campaign. He writes: 'Here are sold a very great number of slaves, which are those people of Prester John whom the Moors take in battle'. From Zeila our adventurous traveller sailed to Diu in Gujerat, and thence coasted to Gogo. From this port he sailed west to Dhufar, the ancient Ophir. Then, steering east once again and rounding Ras-al-Hadd, he touched at Maskat, and so to Hormuz, where he arrived in the spring of 1504, three years before its capture by Albuquerque.

From Hormuz he landed in Persia and travelled to Eri—which city I identified as Herat-i-Khara situated to the north-east of Shiraz, and not Herat in north-west Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> He thence travelled to Shiraz and arrived at a fine river, the Eufra, which 'I believe is the Euphrates on account of its great size'. This is a ridiculous statement, the river being actually termed the

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Chapter IV, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. xlviii.

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Band-i-Amir from a dam constructed by an Amir in the tenth century. The word inspired Moore to write:

There is a bower of roses by Bendemeer's stream,  
And the nightingale sings round it all the day long.

Varthema evidently possessed an attractive personality, and at Shiraz made friends with a rich merchant of Eri, by name *Khawaja* Junair, who took him back to his home, where he pressed him to marry his beauteous niece. However, Varthema only wished to travel further east and, deferring the ceremony for the time being, accompanied his friend to Cambay, 'where we entered India'. He adds: 'there are eight or nine kinds of small spices . . . and an immense quantity of cotton. . . . It is impossible to describe the excellence of the country.' Visiting Chaul to the south of Bombay he landed at Gogo (Goa) and 'travelled on the mainland for seven days' to the city of Deccan, or Bijapur, where he notes that 'a great number of the King's servants wear on the insteps of their shoes rubies and diamonds'.

Returning to the coast, he followed it down to Cannanore, 'in which the King of Portugal has a very strong castle'. From this port Varthema proceeded inland to Vijayanagar, the great stronghold of Hinduism in the south, which 'is situated like Milan . . . and the King is the richest King I have ever heard spoken of. . . . He is a great friend of the Christians, especially of the King of Portugal.'

Varthema considers Calicut 'the place in which the greatest dignity of India is centred'. Among the many questions he enquired into was the curious matriarchal system of inheritance. 'The King being dead, and having male children or brothers, or nephews on his brother's side, neither his sons, nor his brothers nor his nephews become King; but the heir of the King is the



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son of one of his sisters.' This custom resulted in women, although nominally married, cohabiting quite lawfully with any other man and thereby assuring that the child is hers and not her husband's. Varthema also describes the Brahmins as being the first class of the inhabitants, followed by the Nairs, who are the armed class of nobles. He refers to the fact that the lowest classes may not approach within fifty paces of the Brahmins or Nairs. Should they fail to cry out or avoid their superiors, the Nairs may kill them without incurring any punishment.

The observant traveller notes the presence of merchants from many parts of Asia and from Ethiopia. He also gives a description of secretly striking bargains by touching hands and fingers under a cloth, a custom which still obtains. Their ships, he continues, are of 'three hundred or four hundred butts', which measurement corresponds to our English 'tonnage'. He notes that the sailing season is from September to April and that from May 1 to mid-August the sea routes are closed by the South-west Monsoon.

*Khwaja Junair* was unable to sell his goods at Calicut since the city was ruined by Portuguese hostilities. Vasco da Gama had opened up friendly relations with the Zamorin (as the king was called) in 1498 and a factory was founded at Calicut in 1500. However, before very long hostilities broke out and, in 1505, at the time of Varthema's visit to Calicut, the Zamorin 'consented that the Moors should kill forty-eight Portuguese, whom I saw put to death'. In revenge for this act, the city was bombarded. It is of quite extraordinary interest to hear of these historical events from such an observant neutral.

Leaving Calicut, the two friends reached Quilon in January

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1515. They then doubled Cape Comorin and, at Negapatam, the *Khwaja* sold some of his goods. Varthema next paid a brief visit to Ceylon. He then sailed to Pulicat to the north of Negapatam, and crossed the Bay of Bengal to 'the city of Tarmassari [Tenasserim] . . . at which city we arrived in fourteen days by sea'.

Varthema mistakes the name of the province for its capital. He also does not realise that he is in a Buddhist country, but he describes the cremation of the highest class of Buddhist monks, whom he erroneously terms Brahmins. He further describes the custom of suitors proving their love by burning 'the naked flesh' with a rag saturated with oil and set on fire.

Having again disposed of some more of the merchandise, the friends decided to visit Bengal, and here again the name of the province is given instead of the city. 'This country abounds more in grain, flesh of every kind, in great quantity of sugar, also of ginger, and of great abundance of cotton, than any country in the world. . . . We also found some [Nestorian] Christians here . . . from a city called Sarnau [in Siam] . . . they are subject to the great Khan of Cathay.' Sarnau was a region at the north of the Gulf of Siam and was probably a corruption of *Shahr-i-No*, or 'New Town'.

These new acquaintances decided to travel with Varthema and Junair, and the united party proceeded to Pegu. The king, who had just gained a victory over his enemy, was delighted with the corals of *Khwaja* Junair, who offered them as a free gift to the monarch, and, as he hoped, was given valuable rubies in return.

Leaving Pegu, which was threatened by the King of Ava, the adventurers 'embarked on board a ship and went to a city





VARTHEMA'S ITINERARY IN THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO





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called Melacha [Malacca]. Near to the said city we found an extremely great *fiumara* [strait] . . . which is evidently more than twenty-five miles wide. And opposite there is a very large island, which is called Sumatra.' It was called Java the Lesser by Marco Polo, and Varthema was the first European to name the island correctly. Of Malacca he writes: 'The said city, which is the principal port of the main ocean, is on the mainland . . . and truly more ships arrive here than in any other place in the world, and especially there come here all sorts of spices and an immense quantity of other merchandise'. Four years later, the Portuguese Captain Sequeira appeared at Malacca on a reconnaissance.

Owing to the lack of safety in the city, Varthema crossed to Pedir, in Sumatra, a great centre for pepper. 'And you must know that in this port there are laden with it every year eighteen or twenty ships, all of which go to Cathay.'

In the onward journey to the Spice Islands Varthema was truly an explorer, while his discoveries were of the greatest geographical and political importance. He, however, writes quite casually: 'In the course of the said journey, we found about twenty islands, part inhabited, and part not, and in the space of fifteen days we arrived at the said island, which is very ugly and gloomy. . . . There are some peasants, like beasts without understanding. . . . Nothing grows here but nutmegs and some fruits.'

Having satisfied their curiosity as to the island of nutmegs, the *Khwaja* asked, 'Where do the cloves grow?' The answer was 'that they grew six days' journey hence, in an island called Monoch [the Moluccas]'. Here the name of the group, but not of the island, was given; the remark 'that the tree of the

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cloves is exactly like the box tree' is correct. The island that was actually visited may well have been Ternate, where Drake made a treaty with its king and shipped a cargo of its coveted products.

Varthema had now reached the most easterly point of this wonderful voyage, and, steering westwards on the way to Java, he records the extremely important statement of his captain, which serves as a motto to this chapter.

Java was described in some detail, its inhabitants being termed 'the most trustworthy men in the world'. On the other hand they were cannibals, and so, after purchasing two emeralds and two eunuch boys, the friends chartered a junk and returned to Malacca, after having accomplished a most important voyage. Here, parting with their Christian companions, Varthema and Junair took ship for Quilon and from that port returned to Calicut.

A longing to regain touch with European society now seized Varthema. He met two Milanese who had made 'between four and five hundred pieces of ordnance large and small' for the Zamorin and who had also taught the natives to make them. He advised them to escape to the Portuguese, but naturally they feared to do so. Varthema decided to desert his benefactor the *Khwaja* without evincing regret, and, in pursuance of his scheme, he 'pretended to be a Moorish saint . . . and happy was he who could kiss my hand'. At this juncture a squadron of Francesco d'Almeida's fleet opportunely arrived off Cannanore and with some difficulty he escaped to the Portuguese castle at that port. There he was received by Don Lorenzo, the son of the Viceroy, who sent him to Cochin, where he gave a full account of the Zamorin's army and of its artillery to



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Francesco d'Almeida. His escape took place in September 1505, and in March 1506 he witnessed the successful naval action with a large fleet of the Zamorin and his allies off Cannanore, of which he gives a most dramatic account. He was appointed a factor by the Portuguese in that year, and in December 1507 he sailed for Europe.

Doubt has been thrown on the reliability of Varthema's accounts. In my considered opinion he ranks as a great explorer, possessing the true spirit of adventure. He also gained a remarkable insight into men and affairs by travelling with Moslem merchants as a Persian Moslem. Thanks to his voyages, which were published shortly after his return, Europe read for the first time about the Spice Islands, while his reports must have been priceless to the Portuguese who followed in his wake.

The intercourse of the Portuguese with China is dealt with in the following chapter at some length. Here, then, we may conclude by stating that, in 1514, Portugal entered the water-gate of China and thus accomplished the splendid feat, so eloquently sung by Camoens, of discovering the Ocean route between Europe and the Far East.





CHAPTER XVIII

THE END OF THE QUEST

Further on, they fell in with a certain pilgrim and devotee, from whom they learned that at a distance of thirty days' journey there was a city called Caperstam, into which no Mahomedan was allowed to enter, and if one did get in he was punished with death. . . . He related also that the inhabitants of that country never visited their temples except in black dresses.

BENEDICT GOES ON Kafiristan



## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE END OF THE QUEST

OUR theme is now approaching its end. After the downfall of the Yuan dynasty there was no intercourse by Europe with China, either by her land-gates or her water-gates. Only the name of Cathay was remembered. Yet some gleams of light were shed by Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, who headed an embassy to the court of Tamerlane and reached Samarcand in 1405.<sup>1</sup> The Spanish envoy was present at the court of Tamerlane when envoys from China appeared on the scene and demanded tribute from the dread conqueror as being 'in occupation of land formerly held in fief to China'. Tamerlane in reply acknowledged that he was in possession of these lands, but sarcastically went on to say that he would not trouble the envoys with his tribute as he intended to take it in person. He then organised a huge expedition against China, but died at Otrar in 1405.

Clavijo, who evidently had not read Marco Polo's work, made enquiries about China and was told of Cambaluc 'as being a great city lying not far from the sea and, for its size, it was certainly twenty times larger than Tabriz'. Upon returning to Spain he wrote the narrative of his embassy, but since it was more than half a century before printing was invented, it does not appear to have been widely known.

To turn to the Celestial Empire, the Ming dynasty, founded,

<sup>1</sup> *Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo Embassy to Tamerlane*, by Guy le Strange (Broadway Travellers).

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as we have seen, in 1368, displayed extraordinary vigour in maritime enterprise for about a century. The third Emperor despatched very powerful expeditions to the various states situated in Eastern Seas. Sumatra and Ceylon paid tribute to China, whose armadas visited Aden and even distant Magadoxo (Mogadishu). This forward policy was gradually abandoned, but Chinese shipping regularly visited Malacca, where Chinese influence continued to be powerful.

Such was the position of affairs when Vasco da Gama anchored off Calicut on May 20, 1498, and opened a new era. In 1509 Diego Lopes de Sequeira sailed to Malacca, where he found the port crowded with shipping from Arabia, Persia, India, Burma, Java and China. At first the arrival of the Portuguese squadron created a panic, but friendly relations were apparently established. However, an attempt was made to seize his ships by the treacherous ruler. Fortunately Sequeira, warned just in time, was able to sail away unscathed, although leaving some of his men as prisoners.

Albuquerque captured Malacca in 1511, but treated the Chinese merchant captains with marked courtesy. The Portuguese Admiral subsequently despatched missions to Siam, but did not attempt to open up diplomatic relations with China. It seems possible that he realised the power and pride of the Ming dynasty and felt that only an ambassador representing King Manoel would be able to treat with any hopes of establishing satisfactory relations.

In 1514, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a Portuguese vessel belonging to merchant-adventurers reached China. This historical event is mentioned by Andrew Corsalis<sup>1</sup> in a letter

<sup>1</sup> Cordier, *L'Arrivée des Portugais en Chine*, ext. from T'oung pao, xii, 1911.



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written to Lorenzo de' Medici in 1515, which merits quotation: 'The merchants of China also make voyages to Malacca across the Great Gulf to obtain cargoes of spices, and bring from their own country musk, rhubarb, pearls, tin, porcelain and silk and wrought stuffs of all kinds, such as damasks, satins and brocades of extraordinary richness. For they are people of great skill, and on a par with ourselves, but of uglier aspect with little bits of eyes. . . . During this last year some of our Portuguese made a voyage to China. They were not permitted to land, for they say it is against their custom to allow foreigners to enter their dwellings. But they sold their goods at a great profit, and they say that there is as great a profit in taking spices to China, as in taking them to Portugal, for it is a cold country and they make great use of them.' This last remark is of great importance. Europeans, generally speaking, could not sell their home manufactures at sufficient profit in the East, but became wealthy on the carrying-trade in the Eastern Seas.

In 1517 the pharmacist, Tomas Peres, the first European ambassador to be appointed to the Ming court, reached Canton escorted by a Portuguese squadron under Fernao Andrade. Peres was a man of no rank, but was selected for his scientific qualifications, his tact and his experience. The local authorities received the ambassador in a friendly manner and applied for permission to send him to Peking, while the Portuguese squadron, as soon as it had sold its cargo of pepper, sailed away, leaving a good reputation for fair dealing. The treatment by Albuquerque of the Chinese merchant fleet at Malacca had created a favourable impression, but the Malay Sultan of Bintang warned the Chinese Government that the Portuguese aim was to spy out the land and then to attack it. Consequently the

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Emperor was undecided as to the policy to be pursued, and it was not until 1520 that Peres was invited to travel to Peking. Meanwhile the favourable situation at Canton had been ruined by the arrival in 1519 of a second Portuguese squadron under Simao Andrade, the brother of Fernao, who not only treated the Chinese officials with discourteous arrogance, but constructed a fort on the island of Tamao, and erected a gibbet on which he hanged a sailor. He also committed acts of piracy and kidnapped children.

The Chinese attempted to capture his squadron, but, thanks to a storm which scattered their ships, he escaped with a rich booty. In 1521 another Portuguese ship reached Tamao. The news of the death of the Emperor was received at this juncture and the strangers were ordered to leave the country and, upon their refusal, were arrested.

To return to the unfortunate Peres, in addition to the atrocious behaviour of his countrymen and the hostility inspired by the warnings of the Sultan of Bintang, the letters with which he was furnished were couched in unsuitable language for the arrogant Son of Heaven. Consequently the ambassador and his staff were treated as spies, and the Emperor, outraged at the insolence of these 'outer barbarians', sentenced twenty-three Portuguese to be executed at Canton in 1523. Peres was tortured and died in prison in the following year.

In spite of this calamitous inception of European relations with China, the Portuguese were allowed to trade at Chang-chuen-shan off the coast of Kwang-tung, and at Ning po, but again they were expelled for piracy and ill-treatment of the population.

However, by a change of their policy they protected Chinese









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ships against pirates and captured one of their strongholds on the rocky peninsula of Macao, where they received an informal permission to establish themselves. This port thereby became the most important link between China and Europe. Even after the ruin of Portuguese dominion in Eastern Seas, the conservative Chinese continued to give them more consideration by charging them lower rates of customs than they charged the English and Dutch.

At the very end of the sixteenth century a new and happier era was inaugurated by the arrival of Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit monk, at the Chinese court. He had studied mathematics in Europe and, upon landing at Macao in 1582, he obtained permission to live on the mainland, where, dressed as a Buddhist monk, he won favour by his astronomical knowledge. After years of patient work, in 1601, he was not only allowed to reside and preach at Peking, but was granted a stipend and a house by the Emperor. Ricci, with his brilliant scientific and mechanical knowledge, worthily represented Europe to the Chinese, who had hitherto only met half-educated traders. Realising the great importance attached to the determination of the calendar in China, he sent for a leading astronomer, with the result that finally a Jesuit was placed in charge of it and appointed to be a high Chinese official. As Hudson puts it: 'the calendar became the key position for the Jesuit strategy in China'.<sup>1</sup> Not content with this success, Ricci set to work to survey China, and the Jesuit surveyors travelled far and wide, and even trained Lamas to extend their surveys to Tibet.

The most important work on China was that of de Mendoza, which, published in 1585, was printed in an English translation

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 301.

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in 1588.<sup>1</sup> It is a remarkable work and must have been of the greatest importance to Europe. 'The highways', writes de Mendoza, 'throughout all this kingdome are the best and gallantest paved that euer hath bene discovered: they are verie plaine, yea vnto the mountaines, and they are cut by force of labour and pickaxes, and maintained with brick and stone, the which by report of them which hath seen it, is one of the worthiest things that is in all the realme.'

Ricci also sent home reports on China and pointed out that 'the power of China rests rather upon the great number of towns and the multitude of inhabitants, than upon the valour of the people. . . . The Chinese are but poor warriors, and the military is one of the four conditions which are considered mean among them. Nearly all the soldiers are malefactors, who have been condemned to perpetual slavery in the Kings' service; they are only fit to war with thieves. Running away is no dishonour with them.'

After the fall of the Mongol dynasty in China no European travelled across Central Asia to China until the journey of Benedict Goes, in a sense, completed the quest. Originally a soldier, he entered the Jesuit order as a lay-brother and in 1595 as a member of the Mission to the Court of Akbar he won the esteem of that great ruler and accompanied him on his summer tour to Kashmir with Xavier, his chief. There a Moslem merchant gave a detailed account of his journey to Xetaia (Cathay) as an ambassador from the King of Kashgar. He stated that it was a mighty empire, containing fifteen hundred cities, many of

<sup>1</sup> I have quoted from the Hakluyt Society's edition of this work.



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whose inhabitants were Christians. There were also many Jews and Moslems.

Satisfied that this country was indeed the land of Prester John, it was decided to despatch an expedition for the discovery of Cathay and the conversion to Christianity of the nations living between India and that country. It seems extraordinary that the Jesuits in India, who knew that Ricci had definitely decided that China was Cathay, should have refused to accept his views. But yet there was the map of Ortelius, which shows Cathay situated in the region of the Amur, to be taken into consideration, while Ricci had not reported a large Christian community. Actually the merchant had mistaken the Buddhists for Christians.

Goes was selected for the task. Akbar, an enthusiastic supporter of the expedition, provided four hundred pieces of gold and letters to various princes who were his tributaries or friendly to him. The route that was first selected was by way of Kashmir and Tibet, but finally Jenkinson's map in the famous *Theatrum Mundi* of Ortelius, which is reproduced in this work, caused the Lahore-Kabul-Badakhshan route to be preferred. A reference to it will show that Jenkinson, from information he collected at Bokhara, placed Cascara (Kashgar) at thirty days from the frontier of Cathay, whence it was three months' journey to Cambalu.

Goes dressed himself as an Armenian merchant, allowing his hair and beard to grow, and adopted the title of Banda Abdulla, or according to another account Abdulla Isai, or 'The Christian'.<sup>1</sup> His party, which was well provided with funds and

<sup>1</sup> C. Wessels, S.J., *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia*, p. 13. Banda signifies 'slave' and Abdulla 'The slave of Allah', so probably Goes spoke of himself as Banda,

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merchandise, included two Greek traders with their servants, while he engaged at Lahore an Armenian, by name Isaac, who, as will be seen, followed his leader to the end.

The annual Kashgar caravan which left Lahore in the spring of 1603 consisted of some five hundred persons with a large train of transport animals. Crossing the Indus at Attock, they reached Peshawar, where they made a halt. Entering the mountains, Goes met a dervish from Capperstam or Kafiristan. The account of this meeting, which serves as a motto to this chapter, constitutes the most important addition which the Jesuit made to geographical knowledge, since his was the first mention of the pagan Siah-Push, or 'Wearers of Black Clothes', of Kafiristan.

Owing to danger from the predatory tribesmen, who batten on passing caravans, an escort of four hundred soldiers was arranged for, probably at Jalalabad. The heights were then held by the armed men while the long line of mules and camels wound up the valleys. In spite of these precautions many of the merchants were wounded. 'Our Benedict', we read, 'fled with the rest into the jungle, but coming back at night they succeeded in escaping the robbers.'

At Kabul the caravan for Kashgar halted for some eight months. It was joined by the sister of the King of Kashgar, who 'was now on her return from that immense journey to Mecca, which she had performed for the sake of her blasphemous creed'. The *Haji Khanum*, to give her the title won by the pil-

as is customary in Persian, and, through ignorance of the Persian language, he is referred to as Banda Abdulla. Benedict knew Persian well, which fact strengthens this explanation. I have consulted the above work as well as the account given by Nicolao Trigantio, from which I mainly quote. Ricci also compiled an account of the journey from the diary of the explorer and from the descriptions given by Isaac.



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grimage, had run short of money. Accordingly Goes, realising the importance of obtaining the royal favour at Kashgar, advanced her six hundred pieces of gold, which she afterwards repaid him 'in pieces of that kind of marble which is so highly esteemed among the Chinese'. This was the famous jade of Khotan.

The onward journey led to Charikar, where the various routes across the Hindu Kush branch off. The Parwan Pass across the Hindu Kush was probably chosen, and upon reaching Calcia, which may signify the land of the Ghalcas, Goes describes the people as 'having yellow hair and beards like Flemings'. It is difficult to fix the various stages but, at Talikan, he struck the route of Marco Polo. Here the caravan was held up by a revolt of the Calcias directed against the *Khan* of Bokhara. Continuing the journey, the travellers were attacked at Chescan (Teshkan) and forced to pay tribute on their merchandise.

Not long afterwards four brigands set on Goes, but he adroitly threw his cap with its glittering jewel among them and galloped off while they were quarrelling over it.

Following in the footsteps of Marco Polo through Badakhshan, Goes ascended to the Pamirs, where five of his horses perished in the 'Pamech desert'. He also noted that 'both men and beasts sometimes felt oppressed beyond endurance and gasped for breath'. The travellers finally reached Sarikol, where, as is the case to-day, they found several villages built close together. They then crossed the Chichhiklik Pass and Isaac was nearly drowned in the Tangitan River which flows down from it into the Zerafshan River. Finally Yarkand was reached in November 1603.

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The Yarkandis were fanatical, but Goes found favour in the eyes of the king by gifts and by his tactful behaviour. This was fortunate, since he was delayed in that rich oasis for a year awaiting the organisation of the caravan to Cathay. The king sold the right to be his ambassador to the Chinese court to the highest bidder, who in his turn sold the right to be appointed ambassadors to four associates, after which he enrolled in his suite one hundred and seventy-two travellers, who also had to pay for their appointments.

While these arrangements were being made, Goes, following again in the footsteps of Marco Polo, visited Khotan to arrange for his loan to be repaid by the mother of its prince. During his absence false rumours of his death had been spread and the *Cashishes*<sup>1</sup> of Yarkand were attempting to seize his property 'as that of one who was dead intestate and without an heir'. However, Goes 'returned with his debt paid in ample measure with pieces of that valuable stone of which we have spoken', and proved the falsity of the reports.

Goes was invited by the *Caravanbashi* to accompany the embassy to Cathay, and, in the middle of November 1604, the enormous caravan started from Yarkand. It followed the northern route, avoiding Kashgar, and, as before, it is difficult to identify the various stages until the important town of Aksu was reached. It was ruled by a young nephew of the King of Kashgar, who received Goes most kindly. The next important centre was Kucha, where 'they halted a whole month to rest their cattle'.

Thence they proceeded to Cialis—probably Kara-shahr—

<sup>1</sup> This word really signifies a Christian presbyter and is erroneously used for a Moslem *mulla*.



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where, to quote once again, the Governor 'began to utter threats, saying that it was too audacious a proceeding that a man professing another creed should intrude into that country, and that he would be quite justified in taking both his life and his property'. Summoned to a meeting with the Doctors of Muhammadan Law, Goes feared the worst, but to his surprise the Prince 'expressed approval of everything that he said, and finally pronounced his conclusion that the Christians were really true Believers, adding that his own ancestors had been professors of their faith'. Here we undoubtedly have a most interesting reference to the Christianity of many of the Mongolian and Turkish tribes, to which Carpini and Rubruquis bore witness.

While halting at Kara-shahr, the merchants of the preceding caravan arrived from Peking, where 'they had been quartered at the same hostelry with the members of our Society'. Thus Goes 'learned to his astonishment that China was the Cathay that he was in search of'.

Leaving the main caravan, Goes pushed on to Turfan and to Hami. Thence crossing the Gobi he reached the famous Jade Gate. Receiving permission to enter China from the viceroy of the province, Goes arrived at Suchau at the end of 1605. He wrote to the Order at Peking to report his safe arrival and begged that 'some way of rescuing him from the prison in which he found himself, might be devised'. After a long interval, which was partly due to the fact that Goes was ignorant of the Chinese names assumed by the Portuguese missionaries, a convert reached Goes in March 1607 to find him a dying man. Upon receiving the letters the heroic Jesuit 'burst into the hymn *Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine*, and shortly afterwards died'.

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In 1931 an equally intrepid traveller, Miss Mildred Cable, was at Suchau, and heard Moslems talking about the grave of a 'venerable foreigner'. She found it outside the city in the wind-swept Gobi, and was told that prayers were said at it. She was finally able to prove that it was the tomb of Goes.<sup>1</sup> A member of the Order pronounced his epitaph, 'Brother Benedict seeking Cathay found Heaven', and on this note the quest was ended.

<sup>1</sup> *Something Happened*, p. 167.



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